

# THE INVESTIGATORS in

## THE SECRET OF THE ISLAND OF DEATH

### PART III: THE CURSE OF THE TOMBS





in

**THE SECRET  
OF THE  
ISLAND OF DEATH  
Part III: The Curse of the Tombs**

Jupiter and Bob reunites with Pete on the Island of Death in the Pacific Ocean and team up with members of the mysterious organization to capture the traitor who is set to jeopardize the mission. From there, they uncover the massive secret of the island. However, the traitor's failure triggers off a back-up plan by a supreme force to stop the rest from revealing the island's secret to the world. In their escape from the island, The Three Investigators experience one of their most daring and exciting adventures ever.

The Three Investigators  
in  
The Secret of the Island of Death  
Part III: The Curse of the Tombs

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## 1. Rough Stuff

A deafening explosion.

One.

A shock wave shook the whole island, tore through metre-thick layers of rock and made the earth break up in waves.

Two.

Boulders raced through the air like projectiles and drilled into the churned-up soil. Rocks rained down.

Three.

Screaming people. Screams of fear, pain, death. The world had ended.

Four.

Pete was waiting for all this while counting the seconds.

But none of that happened.

Five... Six... Seven... Eight... He still protected his head with his arms and pressed his body as flat as possible to the ground. It was going to blow any moment.

Now! Now!

Twenty-one. Something was wrong. Either he had misread his stopwatch or... Pete dared to lift his head up a little and take a look at his sports watch.

There was no doubt, the five minutes were long gone. And there had been no explosion—at least not one that was significant enough for him to have noticed up here.

Where were the others? The Second Investigator looked around.

It was dark outside, but the moon and stars illuminated the crater basin enough to be able to see the surrounding area. No one was in sight. Then Jupiter's head appeared behind a rock on the crater slope. He looked distraught.

He was obviously as irritated as Pete, but gave him a sign to stay down. Maybe the detonator was a few seconds late. They were a minute over time.

A minute and a half. Nothing happened.

“You fools! I’m the only one who can fool around! What’s going on here?” It was Juan. Who else? He crawled out of his cover in a small hollow, knocked the dust off his clothes and stomped angrily towards Pete.

“Look out!” cried Pete. “The bomb is set to go off at any moment!”

“Bomb!” snorted Juan. “There is no bomb! Or did you hear something?”

“I saw it,” Pete replied and pointed to the ground. “Down there.”

“You have nothing! You made common cause with the traitor! I’ll show you, boy!” Juan grabbed Pete by the jacket collar.

“Hey!” yelled Pete. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Juan!” Professor Phoenix returned from the top of the crater. “I’m telling you for the last time, leave the boy alone.”

“Don’t you see what’s happening here, Professor? These boys—”

“—Certainly have nothing to do with the conspiracy you suspect behind everything and everyone,” Phoenix said.

“And what makes you so sure?” Juan hit back.

“My instincts... and my common sense. Open your eyes, Juan. These boys are teenagers. Do you honestly believe Mr Hadden would send three teenagers out to spy on you or me?”

“So? Then how do you explain what just happened? A bomb! Don’t make me laugh! I can tell you what these three were up to. They lured us out of the facility, that’s what’s behind it!”

Now Jupiter also came out of his hiding place and joined the others. “That is not true. There really is a bomb. Olin smuggled it here aboard the *Explorer*.”

“But why didn’t it go off?” cried Pete. “Something went wrong!”

“What’s going on down there, Jupiter?” Phoenix asked. “What’s behind the armoured door? And what has Olin done?”

The First Investigator told the whole story. “We still don’t know the secret behind this facility. Only one thing is certain—it is much, much bigger than we thought. I don’t think we have any idea how big. There are so many doors and corridors that we’ve passed and we don’t know what’s behind them.”

“And you believe him?” Juan was furious

Professor Phoenix nodded calmly. “Yes, I do. Because it makes more sense than the story you’ve concocted.”

“Juan was right about one thing,” Jupiter interjected. “The thing with the bomb was a fake.”



“What?” cried Pete. “What makes you think of that? We saw the thing with the detonator.”

“Sure. But as you can see, nothing happened. And don’t you think it’s a little strange that someone changes into a completely different person from one second to the next? That an intelligent man like Olin is suddenly possessed by some kind of delusion? That was all for show!”

“And what was the point of this show?” Pete asked.

“To drive us all out of the facility. It was Olin’s only chance to get out of this whole thing in one piece, after I’d seen through him and exposed him. That thing about the anger of the ancestors and the holy island was part of his act. He had to give us some reason for his behaviour. Of course, it was easier to play the mad scientist than to come up with the truth.”

“The truth?” Pete asked. “But what is the truth?”

“I can’t tell you that either. Not yet. All I know is that Mr Olin is the key to the whole thing. I’m sure he knows exactly who built this facility and for what purpose. If we can get him, we can solve the mystery of Makatao.” Jupiter, lost in thought, pinched his lower lip. “However, there is a problem.”

“And what’s that, Jupe?” Pete asked.

“If my assumptions are correct, Olin will have made sure that we won’t be able to enter the facility again so soon. He probably locked the armoured door securely. And with a bit of bad luck, we have blocked the altar door ourselves.”

Suddenly, Jupiter started walking past the ruins to the middle of the crater, where the altar was located. The First Investigator pressed his hand on the magic circle. Nothing moved. The stone block remained motionless in its position.

Jupiter nodded grimly. “As I had suspected. When we rushed out, of course, no one bothered about the weight transfer procedure. Now we are locked out.”

“So what now?” Pete asked.

“We still have an ace up our sleeve. Bob’s down there. Do you know where he is, Pete?”

The Second Investigator shook his head. “I don’t know. It was pitch dark in that room. Anyway, when we reached the stairs, he was still with us. And after? I can’t remember, but I had other things on my mind.”

“He probably fell on the stairs,” Jupiter suspected. “But by now he will have realized that the bomb did not go off. I hope he does the right

thing.”

“And what would that be?”

“Well, open the door for us. I don’t think he’s gonna be reckless enough to go up against Olin on his own. Would he?”

In the dim lighting from the corridor, Bob stood stunned in front of the mural. Big, round, staring eyes... long noses... distorted mouths that bare their teeth. The faces on the wall staring at Bob. Bob stared back. The world around him sank into a mist of silence and darkness.

At the very edge of his consciousness, he could still see Pete and Jupiter climbing the stairs at the end of the room.

It wasn’t important. Nothing mattered anymore. There were only these faces—distorted grimaces with bared teeth and piercing eyes. Bob walked slowly along the wall. They seemed to follow him with their eyes. It was disconcerting. They seemed so real, so... so alive... as if they were waiting for him... as if they were trying to tell him something.

Bob knew these images. He knew he’d seen them before. But where? And when? He couldn’t remember. But then his eyes fell on a face in the middle of the wall. It was the biggest of all, and his eyes were so penetrating that Bob felt they were looking right into his head. There was a barrier—a barrier in his memory. Bob hadn’t known it was there, but now he sensed that something was hidden behind it, carefully shielded from his consciousness. Suddenly, the barrier cracked.

Images seeped through. Night... An industrial area... Warehouses... The barrier in his mind began to crumble... A hiding place behind a steel container... A sound... It collapsed and a flood of memories poured into Bob’s brain... The events... slowly... coming to light...

A tall, dark figure had appeared from nowhere behind his back! It struck out! Bob raised his arm. A heavy, hard object hit his wrist. A searing pain flashed through him. Bob wanted to scream, but something crashed on his head. Bizarre patterns exploded before his eyes. Suddenly, everything went dark.

When he woke up and opened his eyes, there was light. It was a lamp, but the light was weak.

He was lying somewhere. On a bunk or something. Bob’s head hurt. Worse, though, was his wrist. He could barely move his wrist. Where was he? What had happened? He had been waiting for Skinny Norris to meet

Joseph Hadden at the Santa Monica Industrial Park. Then suddenly someone had knocked him down. It wasn't Skinny or Hadden.

"I think he's awake." A soft, deep voice came from the direction of the light at the back of some chairs. Someone was coming towards him. Two people, one small, one tall—that's all Bob could see in the dim light.

"Are you okay, Skinner?" the small one asked, leaning over him so Bob could see his face. It was lean and sunken, its eyes shining light blue. This man did not look healthy. And what had he just said? Skinner?

"I..." Bob started to cough. His mouth was dry.

"Get some water, Dave!" the small guy said to the big guy.

"I'm sorry he hit you so hard, Skinner. I told him to make you submissive, there was never any talk of a cracked wrist and a big bump. He's a bit rough sometimes. Oh, you're surprised I know your name? I know a lot about you, Skinner Norris. And I would have preferred a less brutal method of getting you here. But Mr Hadden felt you would resist. So he gave me this... this gorilla."

Bob's thoughts was racing. What was that man talking about? He thought he was Skinny! But of course, Skinny had been ordered from Hadden to Hall 3, but hadn't shown up there. Bob did.

This small guy and his 'gorilla' Dave probably never saw the real Skinny. What was he gonna do now? Clear up the mistake? Or... play the game? ... If only he knew what game it was all about!

Dave brought him a glass of water. Bob sat up, took it awkwardly and drank in slow, small sips. He had to buy time. He looked over the edge of the glass and took a closer look at his surroundings. The room was small and bare. On the walls, the plaster was peeling.

There was nothing but this bed and a table under a faint light hanging from the ceiling. The window had wooden shutters blocking the view outside. The door was closed. No sound came in.

"You'll surely wonder why you're here, Skinner," said the small one. "I'll tell you. But it's important that you listen to me carefully... Very carefully, you understand? Look at me."

Bob looked into the ice-blue eyes and nodded. "You're going on a very, very important secret mission in two days on the *Hadden Explorer*. And you're gonna play a central role in it. You're gonna have a big responsibility. Do you understand me?"

"Yes..." That meant no. "What responsibility?"

The man made a reassuring gesture. "Ten days ago, the crew of the *Hadden Montana* on Makatao made an amazing discovery. A discovery that led to the launch of a second expedition. On board the *Hadden Explorer* will be experts who know what to do with this discovery. There is only one problem."

"Which is?"

"Mr Hadden, who finances the entire operation, does not trust the second team. He knows from reliable sources that there is at least one mole among the expedition participants. But he doesn't know who. There is not enough time to put together a new team as the *Explorer* has to leave in two days. So what's the option?" He looked at him briskly.

"I don't know," Bob confessed.

"*Divide et impera!*"

It was Latin. That much Bob knew. But not what it meant.

"Divide and conquer! Give no one all the power, give everyone only a part of it, so no one can betray you. That's exactly what Mr Hadden did. Everyone on board the *Explorer* has only part of the information so as not to jeopardize the expedition. No matter who the mole is, he won't be able to thwart the expedition because he lacks the most important information."

"And what would that be?"

"The place where what Mr Hadden wants is located."

"I don't understand. You said the crew of the *Montana* has already found something."

The small man shook his head, smiling. "No. They only discovered that there is more on Makatao than expected. But where exactly it is, they do not know. And it will be your task to keep this secret."

"Mine?" Bob swallowed. "But... but I don't know what this is all about!" He bit his lips. Had he given himself away?

But the man shook his head. "No one there knows. *Divide et impera!* Everyone only gets a small part of the great truth. Even I do not know it. Mr Hadden only hired me to give you the information where the answer to the puzzle is."

Bob frowned. There was one question that had been bothering him. "If Mr Hadden doesn't trust anyone on the crew, why does he trust me?"

The small one laughed. "He does not."

"Then why does he want to give me this important information? I could pass it on to the mole and then run away."

"You couldn't."

“And why not?”

“Because you won’t remember anything after this conversation.”

“What do you mean?”

“With your permission, of course.”

“Huh?”

“I want to hypnotize you. Oh, I completely forgot to introduce myself. Allow me? Cypher, the best hypnotist in California.”

“Cypher?” Bob mockingly repeated.

“A stage name. Not a very good one, I admit, but it’s catchy.”

“You won’t be able to hypnotize me,” Bob said for sure. “Not ever.”

“I agree, only if you resist,” Cypher said. “That’s why I’m asking you to listen to me so you understand what this is all about. Without the information I’m about to give you, the whole mission is meaningless. It is extremely important that a person on board the *Explorer* knows where on the island to search. But of course, the mole will try to get this information. He will leave no stone unturned. He may even resort to violence. So our secret agent must be as inconspicuous as possible. And how will he do that? By not even knowing that he knows a secret.”

“I still don’t quite understand,” Bob frowned. “You... You want to implant a piece of information in me?”

“So to speak, yes. If I hypnotize you, you won’t be able to remember the information until you get to the island. Until then, the secret is safe—safer than anywhere else in the world, namely in your head. And you won’t even know it.”

“And if I refuse?”

“I can’t make you. No one can be hypnotized if they don’t want to be. Your inner willingness is a prerequisite for it to work, otherwise, even the best hypnotist in the world can do nothing.” Cypher looked at him earnestly. He was waiting for a decision.

But Bob was not yet ready to agree to the matter. “What do I get out of all this?”

“Well, I think you know that.”

Bob winced. He knew nothing!

“Mr Hadden said you’d be paid handsomely for this assignment. If you refuse, no doubt he’ll call you tomorrow to—how shall I put it—have a word with you... or worse.” He smiled ambiguously. “Hadden indicated that you owe him something. I think you know what he meant by that.”

Bob could guess. Skinny had done something, he knew that much. And Hadden used it as a leverage against him. The problem was, Bob wasn't Skinny. What were the consequences if he had that Cypher guy messing around in his brain?

"Assuming I say yes," Bob cautiously began. "What happens to me when I wake up from hypnosis?"

"You will remember nothing and go home. Not of Dave's rude assault, not of me, not of this place and not of the secret. It will be as if you waited in vain for Mr Hadden at Hall 3."

"And my wrist?"

"We'll think of something nice for that."

"Why doesn't Mr Hadden tell me the whole story himself?" Bob asked.

Cypher shook his head, smiling. "You're quite curious. That's not at all how Mr Hadden described you. All right. The reason Mr Hadden is not here is because you might meet him again in the next few days and then possibly remember the hypnosis. We'll be working with images. I will plant the information I entrust to you in your mind with images. The next time you see these images—and it will be on Makatao—the memory will come back. But it could also happen if you encounter anything else you see here tonight. So this room is completely bare. That's why Mr Hadden is not here. And you'll never see Dave and me again, for sure. So?"

Bob was thinking. It was pretty rough stuff! Of course, he had to say yes. This was a unique opportunity to shed some light on this case! This person thought he was Skinny and would trust him with top secret information.

Jupiter would have agreed to the hypnosis without hesitation. The trouble was that Jupiter would never know about it. Neither would Pete. After this session, not even Bob would know what had happened here.

If Cypher was telling the truth, Bob wouldn't remember any of this until something trigger it on Makatao. But he had no intention of ever setting foot on that cursed island. And so that valuable information would be lost forever. But maybe that wasn't the problem. Maybe the question was rather: 'What happened if he refused to be hypnotized?'

Then Hadden would be notified. Hadden would contact Skinny, Skinny would clear up the confusion and Hadden would know that The Three Investigators were on to him.

Bob could not take that risk.

On the other hand... if he let himself be hypnotized and Skinny went aboard the *Explorer* in two days without the secret information, he would most likely thwart the expedition. Bob could not possibly estimate the consequences of this. But that Hadden was up to something was pretty clear, and this was the chance to throw a spanner in the works.

But the crazy part remained—if the mission of the *Explorer* failed because of the decision that Bob had to make now... he would never know that he was responsible for this failure.

This mind-boggling game drove Bob completely insane! His head was spinning. Yes, it was rough stuff. But he had to come to a decision! Cypher and Dave were already getting suspicious if he didn't say something soon...

"All right. I'll do it."

Cypher nodded. "Good. I assure you, nothing will happen to you. I take it that you've never been hypnotized?"

"Once," Bob replied reluctantly.

The hypnotist raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Really? When? And by whom?"

"By a psychotherapist. It wasn't that long ago. But actually, it's a private matter."

Cypher shrugged. "Very well. So you have the experience. So much the better. Then it will be easier to put you in a state of deep relaxation. You know, hypnosis is nothing more than a relaxation exercise. It depends first of all on yourself and your willingness. I am only a mediator between you and your subconscious. Please lie down now!"

While Bob made himself comfortable and tried to shake off his nervousness, Cypher spoke to him in a calm voice: "You're about to feel very calm and relaxed. I'll show you a little mirror. If you follow it with your eyes, you will get tired."

"I see," Bob thought. "I'll be curious about that one."

Cypher crouched on the edge of the bed and took out a small chain from under his black shirt. Attached to it was a round mirror pendant. He held the chain up and made the mirror swing back and forth in front of Bob's face.

"Focus on the mirror..." he said.

Bob followed the small object with his eyes. Now and then he caught the weak light of the lamp and with every flash of light, Bob felt his eyelids actually getting heavier and heavier.

“You feel comfortable... You’re relaxed... You are pleasantly warm...”

A comforting calm spread through Bob’s body... Calm and tiredness...

“Look at the mirror... With every swing you get tired... more and more tired... more and more tired... more and more tired...”

The mirror was all Bob could see. Small and round and shiny, it floated in front of his face, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth... Soon, he could hardly keep his eyes open.

“I will now count backwards from five to zero... At zero, you will close your eyes and be completely relaxed... It will be like a deep, peaceful sleep... You will no longer react to anything but my voice... Five... Four...”

Bob was already so befuddled, he wished Cypher would count faster.

“Three... Two...”

The mirror and the voice and the tiredness. It was all there was.

“One... Zero.”



## 2. The Green Ghost

“I’ve always said there’s a traitor on board!”

“You’ve said many things, Juan,” Dr Svenson replied annoyingly.  
“You probably suspected every single one of us.”

“With good reason! At least two out of five people on the *Explorer* played a double game!”

“At least? What are you saying?” Dr Svenson barked.

“Do you think there’s anyone here I trust anymore? Who’s to say you’re not up to something, Svenson?”

“That’s the last straw! If it were, I certainly wouldn’t be on this side of that cursed armoured door. I’m sure even you know that.”

Dr Svenson, Mr Schwartz and Al had returned to the crater of the volcanic island after Professor Phoenix sent Pete to get them. There had been a great clamour for half an hour. Everybody was blaming everybody and especially Maria Svenson and Juan had nothing better to do than to throw insults at each other.

Jupiter already stopped listening. He looked around. In the meantime, the sun had risen and at least chased away the cold that had crept into his bones. He still didn’t get really warm. That was due to his tiredness.

He noticed that he had not slept properly for ages. The few hours spent in the hut on Pohnpei hardly counted. And the night on the plane certainly didn’t count. He would have liked best to lie down on the spot in the middle of the ruin walls and between all the arguing people. But that was out of the question. Bob was still down there. Olin was probably pursuing some darker agenda right now. Anne was missing. This was definitely the wrong time to think about sleep.

He looked wearily at Pete. The Second Investigator didn’t seem to have it any other way. But one thing was certain. They were not allowed to take a break until they had freed Bob, found Anne and put a stop to Olin. But to do this, they had to open the altar door. Everyone had hoped that they would succeed with their combined forces, but not even seven of them had been able to move the stone altar a bit. But that did not mean that it was impossible. They just had to do it right.

“May I interrupt you all for a moment?” Jupiter asked exhausted. He had actually wanted to put more determination into his voice. “I have a proposal to make.”

“What’s that fat boy doing butting in again?” Juan cried.

“I guarantee that the fat boy has something more intelligent to say than you, Juan!” hissed Dr Svenson. And so the battle of words went into the next round.

But this time, Professor Phoenix, Mr Schwartz and Albert came to the aid of the First Investigator and silenced them.

“Rather than waste our energy on inefficient discussions, let’s channel them and focus on our successful return to the underground facility,” the professor said.

“Excuse me?” Juan asked.

“We should open the door,” Jupiter added.

“We already tried that, smart-ass,” Juan snapped.

“We’ll just have to try to do it in a more efficient way,” Jupiter said.

“And how?”

“By building a block and tackle system—like that done with pulleys.” For a moment, there was silence. Jupiter took advantage of the unexpected attention and continued: “Using a block-and-tackle pulley system, the force needed to move something is divided by the number of pulleys used. For instance, a two-pulley system would enable us to use half as much force required to move an object.”

“Huh?” Juan hissed. “What is this kid talking about?”

“Shut up, Juan,” said Professor Phoenix. “The idea is brilliant. The question is, how do we build this pulley system?”

“With ropes from the ship,” explained Jupiter. “They should be able to support the weight of the altar.”

“Huh?” Pete said. “Could you explain to me how this helps us?”

“With this system, we use less force to move the altar, but we need to pull a longer distance. In this case, half the force, twice the distance, but that shouldn’t be a problem. We have enough space. Have you ever paid attention in physics?”

“I’d probably have heard about that before,” Pete admitted. “But as I can see, we don’t have any pulleys.”

“Yes, we don’t have pulleys, but we can use the same principle in a different way. In our case, our pulley blocks would be the altar and, for example, that monolith over there,” Jupiter pointed to a huge boulder

embedded into the ground a short distance away. “We divide the load to be moved between these two blocks. Since these blocks do not have rollers like pulleys do, there will be more friction, but it would still work. And building it is quite simple. All we have to do is to get a sufficiently long rope and tie it round the monolith as a fixed point. Then we wrap it once around the altar and lead it around the monolith again. And then we pull.”

“It’s still not that clear to me,” Pete confessed.

The First Investigator waved him off. “Never mind. The important thing is that with the help of the block and tackle, we practically have the strength of fourteen people, not just seven. That should be enough to move the altar.”

“I don’t have to understand it, do I?” Pete asked.

“No, Pete. You just have to pull.”

“This is a great idea,” cried Al enthusiastically.

“I’m sure there’s another trick behind this,” Juan growled, but his objection went unheard. It seemed as if he didn’t want to give up his role as a doubter out of pure stubbornness.

“All right!” cried Phoenix, clapping his hands. “Get to work! Let’s go to the *Explorer* and get the ropes.”

Partly enthusiastic, partly grumpy, the group climbed down the slope and disappear into the dense green of the jungle. Only Phoenix and Jupiter stayed behind.

“That was a good thought, Jupiter,” Phoenix said. “I know why Juan doesn’t trust you. You’re too clever for him. It scares him.”

Jupiter did not smile. He was too tired for that. He just said: “I understand.”

The images of memory tore away and Bob found himself in reality again—an underground chamber on a legendary Pacific island. He was still staring into the eyes of the grimace painted on the wall. But the face had lost its vitality. Now it was nothing but an image.

Bob took a deep breath. He was still dazed by the memories. It was like he’d found a treasure chest in his brain—a chest that had been hypnotized into him in two hours of his life. And the treasure map had been a photo of the ancestral images on the wall that Cypher had shown him. By looking into the eyes of this strange face he had remembered where the chest was hidden. And now he also knew where to look for... Wait a minute...

The bomb!

The thought struck him like lightning and sent a hot wave of panic through his body. He had all forgotten about the bomb!

Pete and Jupe—where were they? Bob was whirling around. Nobody was there.

They were running up the stairs, right? After them! How much time did he have left? He looked at his watch—and froze. He'd been standing here staring at the mural for eight or nine minutes!

The bomb should have exploded five minutes ago! But he was still alive. And nothing had collapsed. What had happened?

"Jupe? Pete?" he shouted into the darkness. There was no answer. Bob walked back to the door and looked down at the red-lit corridor.

On the far left was the lift, and it was still out of order. On the far right was the door behind which the bomb was located—with Olin. It was closed. In between there were some other doors.

His friends had taken the stairs. Were they still up there somewhere? Or had they made it out? Should he follow them? He was still thinking about what to do when he suddenly heard a noise. A soft metal scratching—like someone trying to force the wrong key into the right lock.

Bob listened. The sound came from the right. Then he recalled that there were no cameras on this level of the facility, only on the upper level. He struggled with himself for a moment, then went out into the corridor towards the scurry sound. It came from the door not far from Olin's monitor room. Now Bob was sure. Someone was actually trying to pick the lock. Was it Olin?

The scratching stopped. Bob put his ear to the cold, smooth steel. Silence.

Crash! Something exploded right in his ear canal. Bob staggered back and stared at the door.

Crash! Someone tried to open it by force, ramming something very big on the steel plate.

Crash! The noise could have woken up the dead.

Bob hurried back to the mural room before Olin...

Someone came out of the monitor room. Bob made it into the mural room just in time. With his breath held, he pressed himself against the wall.

"Stop it now!" That was unmistakably Olin—a very angry Olin.

Crash!

“Stop it, I said, or I’ll make you stay here for the rest of your days and get mouldy!” The noise died down.

“Thank you, Anne!” The door closed, then it was quiet.

Bob waited a short moment before he dared to take a look at the corridor. Olin had disappeared back into the monitor room. And behind the other door was Anne, who had desperately tried to break it open. So she was no traitor. At least that was something. Bob tiptoed over to her prison and knocked very quietly.

“Anne?” he whispered, barely audible. “Anne? Are you in there?”

“Who is it?” a hesitant voice came through the door.

“Shhh! Keep it down! Olin is right next door. He can’t hear us. My name is Bob Andrews. I’m a friend of... Well, you know, a friend.”

“I... I don’t understand,” Anne gasped.

“I am here to set you free!” That was a lie, but he couldn’t get into a discussion with Anne. Maybe later.

“You can get me out of here?” Anne said.

“Well, actually... I’m not sure how. The door is locked.”

“I have some tools. But it’s pitch dark in here. Do you think you could get the lock open from the outside if I put the tools under the door?”

“I can try,” Bob replied.

A moment later, three or four small metal objects slid across the concrete floor. Underneath was a bent hairpin, the others looked as if they were taken apart from some office furniture. Bob picked them up and looked at them more closely.

“Tools,” he muttered. If only Pete were here! The Second Investigator had a lot of experience opening doors. Bob had looked over his shoulder a few times, but he had never seriously tried it himself. Anyway, he had to try!

Carefully he made a hook and put it into the keyhole and felt the mechanism hidden in it. The piece of metal scraped over small levers, slipped into recesses, but had nothing to grab. It took Bob a few minutes to even understand how this lock could work. Meanwhile, he told Anne in brief sentences who he was, how he got here and what he knew.

“How’s it looking?” whispered Anne.

He tried to put as much confidence as possible in his voice. “It’s gonna be a while.”

It wasn’t easy to concentrate. Again and again, he paused and listened. Was there a sound? The dragging of a chair? Steps? At any moment Olin

could step out the door and find him there.

What was Olin still doing in there? Was he repairing the bomb or the detonator that failed? Or was he plotting something else entirely? Sooner or later, he had to come out. And if Bob was still standing here, then...

Something clicked. Bob winced. But then he realized that it came from the keyhole. The lock! He'd got hold of something! Don't do anything wrong now! Slowly and very carefully, he turned the metal hook further. A resistance gave way very slowly.

Another click. Then the hook slipped off. Bob took a deep breath. Either he had to start all over again or...

He pushed the handle down. Slowly, the door swung open, squeaking. Anne stood before him. She was a petite girl, but looked pale and weak, almost green in the face—like a ghost. A fine film of sweat shone on her forehead. In spite of the dim lighting, she squinted her eyes as she staggered from absolute darkness into the light. Bob reached for her arm.

"You're all green in the face. You look weak," he whispered.

"I feel the same way," she whispered back. "I... I don't know what's wrong. The air... it's so stuffy down here. Maybe that's why."

"Can you walk?" Bob asked.

She nodded.

"Then let's get out of here!" He closed the door and they hurried down the corridor to the mural room. "All right. There's a staircase at the back that goes up and outside, I hope. Think you can make it?"

"I'll try."

They went up the spiral staircase. One turn at a time. Somewhere at the top of the stairs, a faint light shone, but it was still very dim. They had to walk slowly. And Anne gasped so hard after just a few steps that Bob feared she would faint. He let her go ahead so she could set the pace and he could catch her if she fell.

"These stairs seem as old as the prayer chamber," Bob said. "Nothing has been changed here."

"But the corridor we were just in is new," Anne remarked. "I wonder why anyone would build a staircase so low down. The room here has nothing but a few painted images on the walls. I wonder if this was once a burial chamber."

Bob did not answer. He knew what was going on with the room and the mural. But he decided to keep his knowledge to himself for the time being.

Anne continued to walk up the stairs slowly and taking occasional breaks to rest.

“What did Olin do to you?” Bob took the opportunity to ask her what happened.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Anne explained. “So I wanted to see what he was up to and if he was making progress with his computer work. But when I entered the command centre, I saw him tampering with the generator. I watched him for a while and realized that he sabotaged it. Then he saw me. I tried to escape and wake the others, but he caught up with me and knocked me out. Well, and then I woke up in that dark room. Later, I heard some commotion and people running around, so I kept quiet and waited... until just now.”

“Well, that would be us,” Bob said. “I mean, my friends and I.”

“Where are we, anyway?” Anne asked. “And why are you here?”

“We’re behind the armoured door a few floors down,” Bob replied. “Why am I here? It’s a long story.” Bob gave a brief account of what had happened. But he didn’t mention the sudden return of the memory of the hypnosis.

“I want to get out of here,” Anne interrupted him abruptly. “Tell me the rest later.”

Anne took more and more frequent breaks. She looked exhausted to death. But finally, they reached the top of the stairs. An open door led to a coldly-lit corridor. Bob looked carefully to the left and right. There was no one there.

Anne wanted to pass him, but at the last moment, Bob held her back.

“What?”

“We can’t get out of here.”

“Why not?” Anne asked.

“Cameras,” Bob pointed up. “At this level, there are cameras installed at all corridors. The monitors are in Olin’s room. He can see us from there. If he sees us, then...” Bob didn’t express the thought. “Damn! We can’t get out of here!”

“On three!” cried Professor Phoenix. “One, two, three!”

Pete put his feet in the ground and pulled. The rope cut into his skin. He grabbed harder. The long rope scraped across the monolith, and the altar around which they had wrapped the rope moved a little.

“It’s working!” cried Pete enthusiastically.

“Once again! One, two, three!”

With combined forces, they pulled the altar aside bit by bit until the opening underneath was big enough. Jupiter then quickly ran down the stairs and did the weight transfer procedure and ran back out before the door closed.

“Jupe, you’re a genius!” Pete said appreciatively.

The First Investigator waved him off. “I will gladly accept this praise if I can open the armoured door as well.”

“Very well,” said Professor Phoenix. “Let’s go back in.”

The altar door mechanism worked as per normal. Five minutes later, everyone was standing in the command centre. It looked like nothing ever happened. The generator was humming to itself, constantly supplying electricity for the lights and the computer system. The armoured door was closed.

Pete walked up to it and randomly typed in a few digits in the hope that the alarm they had set off an hour ago had disabled the electronics. But there was only an angry buzzing sound and the red light came on. The door remained closed.

“All right,” said Jupiter. “Now I have to figure out how to open this damn door on the computer.”

Not even Juan objected when the First Investigator sat down at the table where Olin had been working a few hours ago, and booted up the computer. The eerie silver spider on the American flag came on followed by the words: ‘Project Spider’.

“Here you are again. Just you wait,” muttered Jupiter. “I may be tired, but I’m not so tired that I couldn’t take on a spider.”

He didn’t realize that everyone else was gradually gathering around him and looking curiously over his shoulder. Jupiter sank completely into the world the screen opened up for him. Numbers, words, information—somewhere here was hidden the key to the armoured door and with it the key to the secret of the Island of Death. He just had to find it.

“Now!” Bob ran off. Down the corridor to the next corner. Quick, quick, before the camera spun around again and caught them! Anne followed close behind him. Hopefully she wasn’t too weak or too slow. Hopefully she didn’t fall!

They squeezed into a door frame a second before the camera panned around. They did it! This was a blind spot. At least that’s what Bob hoped.



“So where do we go from here?” Anne asked. “Around that corner over there, I think.”

“You think so?”

“I can’t remember exactly. We ran through this maze so fast, I’m not quite sure.”

“What if there’s a camera around the corner?”

“I guess we’ll just have to take our chances.” Bob looked up.

They had to wait until the camera caught the part of the corridor they just came out of before they could go on to the next section. Bob estimated they needed six seconds to escape from the electronic eye.

“Get ready! Now!”

Again they ran off. Three seconds to the corner. There was enough time to take a quick look.

There was another camera in the next corridor! But it wasn’t pointed at them. Not yet.

Bob shouted: “Come on, let’s go!” and he rushed forward. “Hurry up!”

And at the last second, they stopped right under the camera. It spun around with a soft whirring sound, taking notice of its surroundings. But it could not capture the space underneath it where Bob and Anne were squeezed together. And so it went on, metre by metre through the underground facility.

More than once they escaped discovery by a hair’s breadth, but luck remained on their side. In between, Bob lost his orientation. He was no longer sure at all whether they were still running in the right direction, but he showed no sign of it.

Anne was already completely exhausted anyway. The cold, white light made her look even paler. She was sick, no doubt. But she had to hold out for that last stretch.

Then at the end of a corridor, the armoured door finally appeared. The exit!

“We made it,” sighed Bob.

“At least almost. There’s a camera. But we’ll get over it.”

“The door is closed,” remarked Anne.

“True. But you see, there’s a red lever in the wall with the label ‘Emergency’ above it. I’m sure this will open the armoured door from this side.” Bob watched the camera, noted the time it took to make one revolution, and timed it to the right moment.

“Go!” Bob cried.

They ran towards the door, stopped under the camera for a second and then continued running. When they reached the door, Bob pulled the emergency lever down. Nothing happened.

“Darn it!” He jiggled the lever, his fingers flew over the keypad, then he tried to open the door with force, but it didn’t budge.

“Bob! The camera!”

The device swung around. It was too late to turn back. The camera caught them—and stopped. Bob’s heart began to race. Now they could only hope that Olin wasn’t looking at the monitors.

“Help me, Anne, we’ve gotta get this door open somehow—”

“Bob and Anne! You brats!” The voice came from everywhere. It sounded distorted, tinny. Bob looked up at the ceiling.

What he had thought was a ventilation system were in fact loudspeakers. Olin!

“How come you are still here? And how did you manage to free her?” Olin’s voice came out from the loudspeakers.

“Let us out, Mr Olin!” cried Bob. “Your game is over. You can’t...”

“Now I understand. You didn’t come back in again. I gather that you never went out in the first place,” Olin said.

“He can’t hear us,” whispered Bob. “He can only see us and speak to us. Come on, we gotta open the door!”

They clawed their fingers into the tiny space between the gap and pulled with all their strength, but in vain.

“Don’t bother!” A blubbering laugh echoed eerily through the corridor. “It’s an armoured door! And I have shut down the emergency exit. There’s no way out.”

“We need tools. There are probably offices here. Maybe we can use a chair or table leg as a lever and break the door down.”

Anne shook her head. “This will never work. Olin is right. This door not only looks stable and escape-proof. It definitely is.”

Bob felt his hope fade. They were trapped! Olin could starve them in here. More likely, he can now set out to find them. They could not hide from him forever. And he had a gun. They didn’t.

“If you are thinking of looking for another exit, there is none,” Olin said mockingly. “I suggest you come back to me very slowly now.”

Bob didn’t move. Anne began to tremble.

“I’ve got to get out of here! I need to get some air!” she cried.

“Don’t panic, Anne, we’ll find a way.”

“What are we gonna do?” Anne stammered.

Bob didn’t know. If only Jupiter were here, he’d think of something.

But Jupiter was—

A hiss came right beside them. Bob turned around... and couldn’t believe his eyes. Slowly, almost majestically and with a soothing buzz, the armoured door slid open.

### 3. The Tiger's Revenge

“Bob! Anne!” Pete cried.

“Pete!” Bob jumped out of the corridor and pulled Anne along before the door could change its mind. “Jupe! Did you open the door?”

Jupiter nodded. “Where have you been?”

“I... uh... was down there.”

“Where is Olin?” asked Phoenix. “Is that guy still in there?”

Bob nodded.

“Quick, block the door before we are locked out again!” ordered the professor.

Pete and Al grabbed a table and put it in the doorway. Even the most secure armoured door wouldn't be able to crush an entire table.

“What was going on?” Pete wanted to know. “Where were you when we came out?”

“I... fell,” Bob lied. “On the stairs. Must have knocked my head. Anyway, when I came to, I realized the bomb should've gone off by then. Something must have gone wrong.”

“Hardly,” corrected Jupiter. “I bet Olin just wanted to get us all out of the facility. And he succeeded. But I have gained access to the computer system. Now I can open and close any door in the entire facility if I want to.”

“Our genius,” Pete repeated and slapped Jupiter on the shoulder. “Say, Bob, how did you know that that black thing is a bomb?”

“I've seen it before. There was a photograph in a newspaper article. It was the Silver Spider, I remembered it clearly.”

“And what did the article say?” Pete asked.

“If only I could remember that. I've been thinking. I just can't remember.”

It took them a while to bring each other up to speed. Albert took care of Anne and escorted her out of the command centre. The girl was white as a sheet and just wanted to get some fresh air, nothing else mattered.

“Enough talk!” cried Juan. “Let's catch the traitor.”

“For once, I agree with you,” said Dr Svenson. “Let’s not give him too much time to prepare for us.”

“How do we proceed?” Mr Schwartz wanted to know.

“I have a plan,” said Jupiter. He looked around. Everyone listened to him, even Juan. It seemed that Jupiter had finally earned respect. “I will print you a map of the grounds so you won’t wander around the corridors unnecessarily. Forget about the lift. It’s not working. You have to take the stairs. I assume that Mr Olin is still in the monitor room. He’ll be watching you from the cameras. But it won’t do him any good.”

“There’s only one catch, Juve,” Pete thought. “He locked himself in there. Shall we besiege him and starve him out?”

“There’s an easier way. I’ll stay here and open the door using the computer. He won’t expect that. The important thing is that the timing is right. Bob? Synchronize!” They simultaneously activated their stopwatches. “In exactly seven minutes, I shall open the door to Olin’s hideout.”

Jupiter handed the printed map to Professor Phoenix. “Good luck.”

Juan, Maria Svenson, Professor Phoenix, Pete and Bob set off. Mr Schwartz remained with Jupiter without explanation. The First Investigator could figure out why—trust was good, but control was better. And trust was no longer given to anyone here. He didn’t hold it against Schwartz. If he were in his position, he probably would have done the same.

Bob took the lead of the small group. He knew this area best, but he still took a look at the map every now and then as a precaution. He didn’t have to worry about the cameras any more. On the contrary, he couldn’t resist looking directly into the lens and grinning gloatingly. With the small army behind him, he was in control. He felt strong—as long as he didn’t think about the weapon Olin was carrying. He could not estimate this man at all, for he could go crazy and fired. Bob scared that thought away.

“Here come the stairs,” he said. “You must be careful, it’s absolutely dark.” Slowly they descended the spiral staircase.

At the bottom, Bob avoided looking at the images on the wall. But Dr Svenson noticed them immediately.

“This is wonderful! The stairs, this room with the mural... it’s all amazing! These people must have been very highly developed. Still, it’s a mystery to me why this facility reaches so deep into the mountain. It’s a shame we’re only here to pull some logs out of the fire for Mr Hadden. I’d love to explore all of this.”

She would be amazed at what she might discover, Bob thought.

Then they rushed into the red-lit corridor, and Bob led them to the monitor room. The door was locked. Professor Phoenix shook it, banged on it and shouted: “Open up, Olin! You haven’t got a chance.”

No answer.

Juan pushed forward. He had drawn his gun. “May I, Professor?”

Phoenix nodded. They took a step back. Juan pointed the barrel of the gun at the door lock and pulled the trigger. A deafening bang echoed through the corridor. The lock shattered. Juan ripped open the door and went in. There was nobody there!

Behind the bulletproof glass there was nobody. Only the bomb was still there.

Pete couldn’t help but sneer at Juan. “You see, the story about the bomb was true.”

Juan growled reluctantly. Then he asked: “And where is Olin?”

Dr Svenson put her finger to her lips and pointed to the connecting door. It was possible that Olin was hiding behind it because the door was in a blind spot that could not be seen through the glass.

Juan stepped towards the connecting door and shouted: “Get out, Olin! The game is up!”

“Do you think that’s where he’s hiding?” Pete whispered to Bob. “I mean, he knew we were coming. Wouldn’t it be pretty stupid of him if—”

“Yes, it would be” Bob agreed. “If it was me, I’d have walked away.”

“The cameras!” Pete remembered and pointed to the monitors behind the bulletproof glass. “If he has escaped, we should be able to see him.”

They watched the screens attentively. All corridors were deserted. Cameras were installed throughout the facility, except in the command centre and down here, in the red-lit corridor.

Pete hadn’t quite finished thinking about it when he heard a familiar click. The click of a gun with the safety off.

“Freeze! Now turn around slowly!” Olin appeared in the doorway behind them. He must have hidden in the lift and sneaked in. “Put the gun down, Juan. Drop the gun!”

Juan looked at him grimly—and did not move.

“Put the gun down!” Olin repeated.

“Do as he says, Juan,” hissed Phoenix. “He is unpredictable!”

Olin took a threatening step forward and pointed his gun directly at Juan’s head. “Give it to me!”

“Juan, you can show off your machismo later, this is not the right time,” urged Dr Svenson.

With an angry snort, Juan handed over his gun.

“You all think you’re so smart, don’t you? But forget it. You won’t get me!” Olin pushed his way past the small group to the back room door. The keypad was still destroyed, but he had obviously restored the right connections. Because when he entered a combination of numbers with flying fingers—so fast that Pete and Bob couldn’t possibly see which numbers they were—the green light came on and the lock snapped open.

“What are you up to, Olin?” asked the professor.

“You will all go into the back room now,” Olin said. “I will close it, and then I will take out the rest of your gang.”

“What’s all this about? What are you hiding from us?” Dr Svenson asked.

Olin just laughed. “You really think I’d make the bad guy mistake and tell you my secrets? Forget it! Get in.”

“No way!” growled Juan.

Bob quickly glanced at his watch and then said: “I’d say we go in now. There’s no point in messing with him after all.”

Juan looked at him in surprise.

“The kid gets it,” Olin said appreciatively. “Get in!”

One after the other they entered the back room. Olin closed the door behind them. It was dead quiet. The bulletproof glass swallowed every sound from outside. Olin waved at them through the glass once more, then turned off the light and stepped back into the corridor. Only the faint red glimmer of light coming through the open door illuminated their little prison.

“We’re trapped,” said Pete in a grave voice. “We’ll never break the bulletproof glass.”

“Wrong,” Bob disagreed. “We’re not trapped.”

“Why not?” Pete asked.

“Because Jupe will open this door in exactly twelve seconds. Why do you think I pushed for us to get in this room earlier? Olin should feel safe and leave before Jupe performs his electronic miracle.”

“Oh, boy!” moaned Pete. “I forgot all about that!”

Click.

“Taraa, the door is opened,” Pete exclaimed as the door opened, and all of them came back out into the anteroom.

“So what do we do now?” asked Maria Svenson.

“No more talking now,” Professor Phoenix said grimly. In the dim light, his healthy eye flashed dangerously. Now he looked like a tiger again. “Now we will act.”

He opened the door and scurried silently like a feline predator out into the corridor. Bob and Pete could not follow him fast enough. As they stepped out into the red-lit corridor, they could barely see Phoenix reaching out and striking Olin from behind. The traitor went down, the gun sliding over the cold stone.

Back at the command centre, with arms and legs tied to a chair and surrounded by everyone present, Olin stared gloomily into space. Half an hour ago, he had awakened from unconsciousness and had not spoken a word since. And it didn't look as if he would do so in the foreseeable future. He had lost his game, but that was no reason for him to reveal what he had actually played.

“All right,” mumbled Phoenix. “Then don't say anything until you turn black! We'll find out what you were hiding from us without your help. The answer lies somewhere in this facility. It will take us a while to search it, but we have time.” He turned away.

“No offence, Professor, but how about a little sleep?” Albert asked. He had returned to the command centre with Anne. She was a little better, but still looked ill.

“I think we all deserve this,” Phoenix agreed. “So let's make up for the night's sleep Mr Olin stole from us.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief and returned quickly to their sleeping places. Many, however, wanted to make camp in the open air. The eternal darkness and the oppressive feeling of being buried under tons of stone hit everyone's minds. Professor Phoenix remained in the command centre and made himself comfortable on the ground near Olin. He assured them that he would wake up if Olin attempted an escape.

“And where do we sleep?” Pete asked his friends and yawned.

“Uh... not at all,” said Bob.

“What do you mean?”

Bob looked around, but there was no one around to overhear them. “I haven't had a chance to tell you two. When I was alone down there... something else happened. But I wanted to wait until I was alone with you.”



Jupiter was suddenly awake. “What? Have you discovered something?”

“You could say that. I know the secret of Makatao.”

## 4. The Empty Grave

Pete took Jupiter and Bob into one of the staff quarters and locked the door. There, Bob told his friends what had really happened during their escape from the explosion. Jupiter and Pete could not believe their ears.

“This is incredible!” cried Pete. “I just can’t believe it! And you really couldn’t remember anything?”

“For the hundredth time, no! Do you think I would have kept it from you otherwise? What I can remember is that I waited in vain at Hall 3 and finally drove home. There I fell down the stairs and sprained my wrist.”

“And none of these memories are real?” Pete asked.

Bob nodded. “Exactly.”

“This is not as unusual as it sounds,” said Jupiter. “What is important is that the hypnotic state is brought about with the full consent of the person. But that was the case with Bob. He wanted to be hypnotized in the hope that he would be able to remember afterwards and find out the secret.”

“Crazy, isn’t it?” Bob said and laughed. “In fact, I shouldn’t have been here in the first place. After all, the hypnosis was meant for Skinny. Now I am in Makatao and triggered by the ancestral images, the memory has come back.”

Jupiter stopped short. His eyes widened.

“What is it, Jupe?” Bob asked.

“Oh, my goodness,” he cried, slapping his forehead with his flat hand. “We are so stupid!”

“Leave me out of this,” Pete demanded. “What are you thinking?”

“The answer to the puzzle! It’s so obvious! You think it was a coincidence you landed on Makatao, Bob? Wrong! It was deliberate and long planned!”

“Excuse me?” Bob asked. “Planned? Nonsense! I’m here voluntarily.”

“Do you think... In reality, Bob, you’re just a pawn in a game,” Jupe continued. “Like all of us.”

“Uh-huh...” Bob didn’t believe a word of it. “And who are the players supposed to be? Would you mind telling us?”

“Skinny Norris and Joseph Hadden.”

“What are you talking about?” Pete asked.

“Watch out, fellas. It was just like Cypher told you,” Jupiter explained. “Hadden didn’t trust the crew of the *Explorer*. So he had to send in a fifth person to carry the most important information.”

“Skinny Norris,” Bob said.

“Exactly. The thing about hypnosis is also logical. Hadden didn’t want Skinny to know the secret beforehand. It wasn’t until he got to the island, when he saw the ancestral images, that he would understand why he was going in the first place.”

“Also clear,” Bob said.

“But Hadden planned all this without letting Skinny know. Skinny is not as stupid as he looks, and somehow got it into his head that Hadden wants to use him. He probably even knew about the hypnosis and that Hadden wouldn’t even be at the meeting in Hall 3.”

“Barbara Jefferson!” cried Pete excitedly. “Maybe she is Skinny’s friend after all! And if so, we know why he approached her—to get information! Either from her personally or through her work papers that Skinny was snooping around in.”

“Possibly,” Jupiter agreed. “So it was through Miss Jefferson that Skinny found out about the hypnosis thing. And as cowardly as Skinny is, he called you, Bob, to send you to the agreed meeting place and see what happens. Cypher and his gorilla logically thought you were Skinny and hypnotized you instead of him.”

Pete snapped his fingers. “You’re right! Now I remember! The next day, we met Skinny at the salvage yard. He asked for you, Bob, and was pretty nervous. And when you showed up, he gave a real weird reaction.”

Jupiter nodded. “For he had of course expected you to immediately tell something about your encounter at Hall 3 and accuse him. But you couldn’t tell anything because your memories of the incident had been taken away.”

Bob was flat. “Wow. You’re really right, Jupe.” He closed his eyes to concentrate. “All right, I’m beginning to get the hang of this. So my meeting with Cypher wasn’t an accident, it was more or less planned by Skinny.”

“And that, in turn, suggests that the rest was no coincidence either,” continued Jupiter excitedly. “Skinny made sure that the confusion game continued. By stunning Pete on board the *Explorer* and taking off.”

Pete struck his fist into the open hand. "I knew it! I knew it all along! You can't trust Skinny! Did I tell you or not, Jupe? Huh? Did I tell you or not?"

"Yeah, all right, you said it."

"The moment we found out that Skinny Norris was our client, we should have left it alone! That's what we get now. That coward! When I get my hands on him..." Pete gnashed his teeth.

"He wanted to get out of the affair and happened to have three megalomaniacal detectives in his vicinity who didn't shy away from any risk," Bob said. "And that's exactly what he used to lure us onto the ice with—our curiosity. We have to stick our nose into everything!"

"So you were on board the *Explorer*, the ship set sail and we stood at the pier in a state of embarrassment," Jupiter remembered. "But we were watched. One of Hadden's men, who was also Rachel Hadden's driver, was assigned to oversee the launch of the *Explorer*. Because after all, Hadden was suspicious. His informer found out that Skinny was not on board the ship and informed Hadden. He spoke to Cypher and got a description. Finally, he realized that Skinny had tricked him. Bob had been hypnotized in his place and Pete was on board the *Explorer*. But that thwarted Hadden's plans. After all, he absolutely had to have someone with the secret information on Makatao. So..."

"... He called his sister," Bob added. "She went on and on about how we had to save our friend. All she really wanted was for me to get to Makatao somehow. Actually, it wasn't even about me, just the information in my head. Unbelievable! This whole thing was a setup."

Jupiter nodded angrily. "And although we found out through Worthington at the last second that the raven lady was Joseph Hadden's sister, our curiosity prevailed and we took the plane. Well, here we are. Hadden was right, actually. There really was a traitor aboard *Explorer*, which is Olin. So his caution was called for."

"I don't believe any of this," Pete said and leaned against a wall, exhausted. This wealth of information had to be digested first. "We all fell for it. The Hadden siblings and even Skinny Norris! But although we know all this, we still have no idea what the great secret of the Island of Death is... or did I miss something?"

"Unfortunately not," replied Jupiter.

"We're gonna find out now," Bob promised. "Let's see what secrets this people had."

The Three Investigators quietly left the staff quarters and peered into the command centre. Phoenix was asleep next to Olin who was also asleep while bound to the chair. This was a favourable moment for the three to sneak unobserved through the open armoured door into the interior of the facility.

“Come on!” Bob cried and they went to the winding stairs and down the endless steps into darkness.

Jupiter grumbled reluctantly. “Yes. I hope there’s time to fix that stupid lift. These stairs make me sick.”

Two minutes later, they stood in front of the mural. The faces stared at them sinisterly. Jupiter slowly shone his flashlight on the wall. In the play of light and shadow the images seemed to move.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Pete remarked. “It’s really fascinating that this people built all this so long ago, isn’t it?” Pete whispered. “Dr Svenson was right, this really is a masterpiece.”

Bob got that tingling in the back of his head again. It was strange. These images had given him two hours of memory. But they also wanted something in return. He had to do something... or rather, they all had to do it together.

“Okay, Bob, just spit it out,” Pete demanded. “What exactly did Cypher tell you during the hypnosis?”

“He didn’t just say something, he showed me something above all—photographs. Photos of this very wall, of these faces,” Bob said. “You know that typical phrase when someone is hypnotized in a TV show: ‘When I snap my finger, you’re wide awake again’. Well, it was similar for me. Cypher showed me the photographs and said: ‘The next time you see these images, you’ll remember everything.’”

“He imprinted information into your subconscious mind,” Jupiter said. “And these images are the trigger to recall that information.”

“Yes, all right,” Pete said impatiently. “But what exactly should you remember? I mean, except for the hypnosis itself.”

“As I stand here, I should think about who of the expedition members is trustworthy and who is not. Hadden must have assumed that by then it would have been discovered who was playing a double-cross.”

“Well, it was true,” Pete said. “Okay, we know who the mole is now. But that wasn’t all we needed, was it?”

“No. The real information at stake, the big secret nobody knows but me, is that wall.”

“Huh? The wall? What about it?” Pete asked.

“It’s not just a wall. It’s a…”

“A secret door!” cried Jupiter. “Right, Bob?”

“Right, Jupe.”

“Wow. How exciting!” Jupe exclaimed.

“A door? I see none,” Pete remarked.

“You’ll see it soon,” Bob promised.

“And… what is behind it?” Pete asked uncertainly. He wasn’t sure if he really wanted to know. Secret doors usually didn’t bode well with him.

“What Hadden is so hot for. The reason we’re all here.”

“And what is that?” Pete asked impatiently.

“Only Hadden knows that. Cypher had no idea. But we’re about to find out.”

“A secret door…” Jupiter mumbled and pinched his lower lip. He was excited. They were close to their goal. In a moment, they would reveal the secret. “How do you open it?”

Bob smiled. “If I were you, I’d tell you to use your brains and figure it out for yourself. But I don’t want to be like that. See that big face over there? And the two little ones on the right? Why do you think the eyes look so piercing?”

The First Investigator only took a second. “Because it’s more than just eyes!” He got closer and shone his flashlight at the images. “Really! It’s hardly noticeable.”

“What?” Pete remarked.

“Take a good look, Pete, eyes slightly protruding,” Jupiter said.

“These are stone cylinders embedded in the wall. I think you can push them in.”

Jupiter tried. In fact, they disappeared into the wall. When Jupiter took his fingers away, they popped out again. That was all.

“I suppose one has to operate all the mechanisms at once. I think one person can manage it but it’s easier if the three of us do it together. Come on, fellas, Bob you go left, we both go right! On the count of three… One, two, three!”

For one terrible moment, nothing happened. Then something crunched. Jupiter had expected that a secret door would open somewhere. But instead, the entire wall moved to the side as if by magic and opened a

tunnel about half a metre wide. Behind it was pitch dark. Stinking darkness. A wave of foul-smelling air sloshed out of the opening towards them.

“Wow!” Bob exclaimed.

“Wow? I would rather say ‘Eww!’ Can’t you smell it?” Pete cried disgustingly.

“Yes, of course!” Bob agreed. “This place hasn’t been aired for a long time.”

“Come on, fellas, let’s have a look,” whispered Jupiter excitedly and shone the flashlight into the tunnel. There was a narrow staircase leading down. “It goes even further down. How exciting!”

“Do we really want to go down there?” Pete asked. “I mean... .think of the curse!”

“The curse!” mocked Jupiter. “That’s what Olin raved about—to scare us. Do you really think there’s anything to this fairy tale?”

“Could be. After all, this is a burial ground,” Pete replied.

“Come on, Pete, don’t be a chicken,” Jupiter said. “We just have to check this out! That’s what we’re here for.”

“After you!” Pete quipped.

“With pleasure.” Jupiter stepped through the opening and down the steep steps. The smell of putrefaction intensified with each step.

After about thirty steps, the stairs ended. The narrow tunnel opened up into a huge cave—a really big cave. Jupiter let the flashlight wander around.

The cave was an elongated tube of volcanic rock. Like a kind of subway tunnel, only much, much bigger. The ceiling arched high above them like a nave. They could not tell how big the cave was. Somewhere far, far back, the light from the flashlight was lost. The Three Investigators were awestruck by this immense size. Jupiter shone across the walls. They were irregularly wavy, but the rock had an absolutely smooth structure, as if it had been worked. Then Jupiter let the cone of light travel deeper. He flinched.

As he illuminated the ground of the cave, an icy cold shiver ran down his back when he saw what was there. Laid out on each side, in two endless rows that went far into the darkness, were stone cuboid blocks. Each block was about two metres in length and had slabs of stone as lids. Side-by-side, the blocks were placed about half a metre apart on the smooth ground. There were maybe even hundreds of it.

Pete was the first to find his voice: “Coffins.” Although he had whispered, his voice echoed long and eerily. The echo filled the cave with a polyphonic whisper.

“I think you are right,” whispered Jupiter even more quietly. “I had been wondering all along why there was constant talk of a grave site, even though no graves have turned up yet. Guess we just discovered them.”

Slowly they stepped further into the cave. Each step caused an endless echo, as if an invisible army of spirits was following them. Involuntarily they turned around, but there were only their own long shadows.

The Three Investigators walked past the coffins. It was like a morgue—as if the dead were waiting to be examined or identified. The stench was almost unbearable by now. The putrefaction was literally sticking in the air.

“Stone coffins?” Bob finally said. “Is this what Hadden is after? But why?”

“Well, probably not so much the coffins themselves as their contents,” Jupiter surmised.

“You mean the corpses?” Pete asked startled and immediately regretted having spoken so loudly. Suddenly the ghost army spoke to them! A thousand invisible voices whispering: “corpses, corpses, corpses, corpses...”

“We’re talking about some Micronesians who have been dead for ages, right?” Pete whispered very softly so as not to create the echo again. “There should not be more than a pile of bones left!”

“Maybe there are other things in there?” Bob interjected. “Jewellery, gold, precious stones?”

“Let’s have a look,” Jupiter decided.

“You want to open it?” Pete gasped.

“Of course,” Jupiter said firmly.

“Are you insane? The curse!” Pete remarked.

“Don’t be silly, Pete. They’re just bones, as you said yourself. They can hardly do us any harm.”

“But... don’t you find it scary here?” Pete said. “I feel like we’re not alone.”

“That’s just the echo,” Jupiter tried to calm him down.

“Hey, look!” Bob pointed to a stone coffin that the beam of light had just shone over. “Shine the light over there again, Jupe! Look, the coffin



looks like it's been opened recently! All the other lids have dust on them, but not this one. And the lid is not exactly placed on top."

"That's right, Bob. Somebody's been tampering with it. And it wasn't that long ago. Let's take a closer look!" Jupiter stepped towards the coffin, put the flashlight aside and tried to push the lid away. "Help me!"

"I don't know, Jupe, I don't know. If... if... if..." Pete stammered.

"If what?" Jupe snapped.

"If it was opened from the inside!" Pete said.

"Nonsense!"

"Or if there's something dangerous in it!"

"What was that all about?" Jupiter insisted. "Come on!"

Pete didn't move, but Bob helped and together they managed to move the stone lid. It tipped to the side and landed on the ground.

*Booom!*

Pete startled. The echoes echoed and echoed and echoed, as if the whole cave collapsed. By now at the latest, they had woken up all the dead on the island. They waited spellbound until the echo had died away. Then Jupiter picked up the flashlight and shone into the coffin.

It was empty. Completely empty.

The Second Investigator breathed again.

"All right. Now we know why there was no dust on the lid. Whatever was in there, someone took it out. So let's look into another one."

"The next one? Jupe, there's probably really a dead body in there! Why do you think it smells so disgusting in here?" Pete warned.

"Pete," Jupiter said calmly. "Why are we here? To unlock the secret of this island, right? There you go. Then don't stop at ten centimetres from the goal!" He went to the next coffin and with united strength they pushed this lid aside too.

*Booom!*

They looked inside. It wasn't a body... not a skeleton, not even a single bone... not even gold or jewels. Inside the stone box was a cone-shaped, matt black metal object of almost one metre long. On it was a painted silver spider. It was a bomb!

Suddenly they heard a noise! A long, stone crunch echoed through the cave like the giggling of a ghost... or like stone scraping against stone—like a coffin lid being pushed away. Then a muffled bang. Like the lid had crashed to the floor. The Three Investigators held their breaths.

Did they just hear a stone coffin open?



## 5. Skeleton Island

“Did you hear that?” whispered Pete. “Did you hear that? We gotta go!”

Jupiter had the beam of light chasing around. He shone at the coffins one by one. They were closed. All closed. The First Investigator breathed again. “That was no coffin.”

“Then what was it?” Pete asked.

“The secret door!” cried Bob. “It has closed!” They ran back to the stairs. Pete was the first. In the dark, he stumbled up the thirty steps... and stood in front of a wall.

“Closed!” he gasped. “The door is closed!”

“It probably works like the altar door,” Jupe said. “It has an automatic closing mechanism.”

“Darn it,” Bob cursed. “How could we be so stupid? We should have expected that!”

“Don’t panic!” Jupe calmed them down. “There’s definitely a way to open the door from this side.”

He shone over the wall. There were no painted images here. No signs, no markings, not the slightest indentation. The secret door sealed absolutely airtight against the rock face.

“Then maybe somewhere else in the cave.” They looked around in the tunnel to the stairs, but there was nothing.

“We’re trapped,” Pete said with a slight panic. “Trapped in a huge, smelly crypt. And no one knows that this crypt even exists, let alone that we’re here.”

“A very amazing crypt though, you must admit, right?” Jupe remarked.

“What do you mean?” Pete asked.

“I haven’t seen so many coffins that hold bombs instead of corpses. I bet there are bombs everywhere. Come on, let’s have a look.”

Although Pete was less interested in the secret of this cave than in its exit at the moment, he couldn’t stop Jupiter anyway. So he and Bob helped to remove a few more stone covers. Jupiter was right—no bodies, but bombs, in every single coffin.

“So now we know,” Jupiter said and sat down exhausted on the edge of a stone block. “Weapons... Weapons were developed, built or tested in this facility—by the US military. This is the Project Spider. Micronesia was administered by the US for decades, some areas are still in American hands today. For example, the Kwajalein Atoll, just a few hundred kilometres from here.”

“And what’s there?” Bob asked.

“Kwajalein is a military base. That’s where they test missiles,” Jupiter explained. “My guess is that the military needed a new testing ground and they eventually got to Makatao. The island’s perfect. It’s far away from any inhabited areas and is even shunned by the natives. There is also a mysterious tomb of a forgotten people, that is, a lot of underground chambers, which you only had to extend a little for their purposes. And this is exactly what happened here a few years ago. A second military base was built, but unlike Kwajalein, this is strictly secret.”

“So secret that Makatao was declared absolutely uninteresting on a massive scale,” Bob said. “Remember how I tried to find out about this island? I had the impression that information had been covered up over the years—to make Makatao seem as uninteresting as possible. No one should ever set foot on this island.”

“But Hadden got wind of it anyway,” Jupiter surmised. “He knew that weapons were stored here. And that’s what he wanted.”

“But what for?” Pete asked. “What would anyone want with a bunch of bombs? I mean, we’re not at war!”

“How naïve are you, Pete? We may not have a war for once. But a large part of the rest of the world has. Weapons are needed everywhere, all the time. And the explosive power stored in this cave can make a lot of money if you know the right people who want it. A tremendous amount.”

“Supplying arms to countries at war with each other? This is madness!” Pete gasped.

“Of course it is,” Jupe agreed.

“All right,” Bob said. “So we’ve solved the mystery.”

“We haven’t,” Jupiter contradicted. “Far from it. We still don’t know why the base was abandoned; why the bombs are still stored here; what Olin’s role is in all of this. And so on.”

“Fine, but we can worry about that when we get out of here, right?” Bob said. “Because we shouldn’t take too much time with this. Because

one of these days your flashlight batteries are gonna run out and I don't wanna be walking around in the dark."

"But how are we going to get out?" Pete asked. "Judging by the stench, the cave has no second exit, otherwise the air would be better. Can we pry open the secret door?"

"Too heavy," Bob said. "Plus, we don't have tools."

Jupiter shone over the walls and the ceiling. He frowned. Then his fingers moved slowly to his mouth and began to pinch his lower lip.

"What goes on in your head, Jupe?" Pete asked hopefully. "Do you have any ideas?"

"How do you think this cave was formed?" Jupe asked.

"How it was created? Well, like all the rest, I guess. It was carved into the rock by years of hard work," Bob said.

"Really? Don't you think it's a bit too much to create a cave as big as a dome for a few coffins?" Jupiter wondered.

"Well, it seemed to have some religious meaning, so the souls of the dead would have room or something, I don't know," Bob said.

Jupiter poked Bob in the stomach. "Wrong! This cave was not artificially created. It's natural."

"You think so?" Pete asked. "I don't think so. And even if I did, that doesn't help us."

"Yes, it is. Because this is a lava tube!" Jupe exclaimed.

"A what?" Pete asked.

"A tunnel of lava. We're in the middle of an extinct volcano, remember? How do you think a cave can be formed in a volcano that's nothing but solidified lava? By wind and weather? Earthquakes? No. This cave is as old as the volcano itself! When it erupted thousands of years ago and the lava flowed out of the crater, the surface of the stream cooled rapidly and solidified. A solid ceiling was created. Underneath, however, the lava was still fluid, continued to flow and left a cavity—this cave! In later years and after further eruptions, the cave sank further and further into the depths, but remained intact. That's why the walls are so undulating and yet smooth—they consist of lava solidified in mid-movement!"

"How do you know all this?" Pete asked, fascinated.

"I've read about it. There aren't many caves like this in the world, but there are."

"Fine. So we're in a lava tube. And what are we doing with it?" Pete followed up.

“That’s logical, Pete. The lava must have flowed somewhere. In other words, this cave must have a second exit! And that’s what we’re looking for. Come on, fellas.”

They ran deeper into the tunnel, between the rows of stone coffins. The cave got lower, but it just didn’t end. Coffin lined up after coffin and the stairs had long since disappeared behind them in the darkness. Then the cave suddenly became narrower. The rows of coffins ended.

After another twenty metres they had to walk bending down. The smell had become worse. They still hadn’t found out what stank so bad here... until Bob, who was walking in front, suddenly stepped on something. It crunched and crumbled under his shoe.

“My goodness, what was that? Give me the flashlight, Jupe!”

Bob lit up the floor and gasped in horror. “Oh, my gosh! Oh, my gosh! This is... this is...”

“A cemetery,” Jupiter noted in a trembling voice.

Bones. Bones everywhere. The floor was littered with human carcasses. They piled up by the walls, scattered all over the cave. Arms, legs, rib cages, grinning skulls with empty black eye sockets. They were partially covered by a half-decayed, stinking black mass. Bone hands reached into the sticky air and seemed to move in the dancing light of the flashlights.

Pete pressed his hands to his mouth. He felt sick. “What is it, Jupe? What is it?”

“These are the bodies that were in the coffins. That was to be expected. The people who put the bombs in the coffins had to move the bodies somewhere. So they brought them here, to the back of the cave. Grave desecration of the worst kind.”

“My gosh, this is not just the Island of Death, but also Skeleton Island,” Pete stammered. “Now what?”

“Now we have to look for the exit,” Jupe insisted.

“You... you mean we have to go through this?” Pete gasped.

“I see no other option. These are just skeletons. Perfectly safe,” Jupe assured. “The exit must be somewhere at the end of this tunnel.”

“Never! I’m not tramping over a mountain of corpses!” Pete cried, aghast.

Jupiter shook his head. “You do nothing else when you walk across a cemetery. But it’s your choice, Pete. Of course, you’re welcome to stay here.”

“I... I...” Pete stammered.

“We should make a decision slowly, folks,” Bob urged. “If I am not mistaken, the flashlight is already fading. Another ten minutes and we’ll be in the dark.”

“There’s nothing to decide,” Jupiter said and pushed himself past Bob. “We have no choice.” He placed his foot in a gap between two femurs and managed three more steps without touching a carcass. But from then on, it was hopeless. The floor was completely covered with bones. He simply had to step on them.

Crunching, one forearm gave way, one shoulder blade crumbled to dust, one chest slipped to the side. Bob followed him, and after some hesitation, Pete also set his foot in the mountain of bones.

The path was a nightmare, worse than any horror movie, and more disgusting than anything they had ever experienced.

Although the tunnel was much narrower now, every word they said still echoed a dozen times. It almost seemed as if the skulls were talking to them. The soft whisper of the skeletons followed them all the way. The black, foul-smelling mass turned out to be the remnants of fabric with which the dead had been clothed. Some skeletons wore wooden amulets and small stone disks around their necks.

“I think that’s what stinks around here,” Jupiter said. “The bodies had been embalmed to preserve them. But when they were taken out of their stone coffins, they rotted rapidly. There is nothing left of the flesh, but the robes are still soaked in oils and ointments.”

“You mean these aren’t just skeletons, these are mummies?” Pete was shaking. “This just gets better and better.”

He put his foot against one of the pelvic bones... which caused a small pile of bones to slip to his right side. A skull rolled down and flipped open its jaw. Pete let out a little scream that came back as a giggling echo, as if the skull laughed at him. Involuntarily, the Second Investigator took a step back. Then he felt something on his lower leg. A bony hand had rested on his calf. Caresses of the Grim Reaper. Disgusted, Pete tore himself away. The phalanges fell off one by one.

“Get out! Jupe, hurry up,” Pete screamed. “I want to get out of here! Hurry up!”

The path seemed endless. And the flashlight grew weaker and weaker. Soon they followed a reddish glow that barely lit the ground right in front

of their feet. But then, finally, they reached the end of the tunnel. A stone slab blocked their way.

“It doesn’t look as if there’s a hidden mechanism here,” Jupiter noted. “I hope it works with brute force.” He braced himself against the slab. It did not move.

“We have no idea how thick this slab is,” Bob said. “Maybe it’s a huge chunk. Then we have to go back.”

At that moment, the light went out. Impenetrable darkness enveloped them. And suddenly, every sound appeared twice as loud—their breathing, the touch of their hands on the rock surface, and the crunching of the bones under their feet.

“Never!” gasped Pete. “I’m not going back! I want to get out of here now!”

He went between Bob and Jupiter and threw himself against the slab. No effect. “Come on, everyone! One, two, three!”

Bones shattered and skulls cracked open as the three of them used all of their strength to push the slab together. The slab moved slightly.

“This is not going to work, we have to push harder!” cried Jupiter. They sought a firm hold on the bone floor. “One, two, three!”

With all the strength they could muster, they pressed against the slab. It tilted slightly.

“Keep going, don’t give up!” Bob encouraged them.

The slab tilted a little more, reached the critical point—and fell outwards. With a muffled thud it rolled down the undergrowth on the other side.

Air! Daylight! They were finally outside.



## **6. The Coffins**

“Fascinating,” said Dr Svenson repeatedly. “I had always wondered what makes a people drive such a huge underground tomb into the rock. But your discovery casts a whole new light on the history of this island.”

“What’s your theory, Dr Svenson?” Phoenix asked.

“I think the Micronesians eventually discovered the lava tube cave. If it’s as huge and impressive as you say, maybe they saw some kind of sign in it and made Makatao their Island of Death. Over the generations, their ancestor worship continued to develop and they began to use the crater as a place of worship, build temples, erect memorial houses and finally connect the cave with the crater. This is how the underground tunnel system with the prayer chamber and everything else was created. The whole thing was a mammoth project that probably continued to develop over several centuries.

“One day, the people disappeared and left their mysterious heritage to the world. There were many wars in the Pacific. Perhaps the culture that built this has been wiped out by another tribe. It wouldn’t be the first time in history. I’m dying to see this cave!”

It was late afternoon. The Three Investigators were standing with Dr Svenson, Professor Phoenix, Juan, Anne and Albert outside near the altar and reported their discovery. Mr Schwartz was at the command centre to guard Olin.

After coming out of the cave, The Three Investigators found their way to the beach. They would never have discovered the cave opening from the outside because the slab that had blocked the cave had been hidden by overgrown plants. It was a perfect hiding place.

When they returned to the crater, they had made up their well-deserved sleep until they and all the others were woken up by a tropical downpour. Meanwhile, the sun was shining again, but it could have snowed and nobody would have registered it. Everybody was hanging on Jupiter’s lips as he told them about the burial cave, the stone coffins, the bombs and the bones.

Then the big talk broke out—everyone had the wildest suspicions and plans. Only Anne held back. She was still very pale and had sat down on the floor because she had become dizzy.

“I want to see the cave too,” Al said. “And the skeletons, of course.”

Pete pulled a face. “Believe me, Al, you don’t want this.” He shook. “It’s... scary!”

“I don’t care,” Al insisted. “I still want to see it.”

“I think something else has priority,” the professor raised his voice. “I think we should confront Mr Olin for the truth. We now know what he was trying to hide from us. Perhaps he is now ready to tell us the rest of the story.” He looked around. Everyone agreed.

Three minutes later, they were standing around Mr Olin in the command centre. He was still staring straight ahead and didn’t seem to be listening at all when Professor Phoenix and Jupiter Jones spoke to him alternately. But the First Investigator was sure that Olin understood every single word exactly and that it was bubbling behind his expressionless façade.

“Those weapons were developed and tested here,” said Jupiter. “They were built elsewhere, this is not the place for that. The questions are: ‘Why did they stop? Why was this facility abandoned? And what made Project Spider such a secret?’

“Kwajalein is also a military base, but the whole world knows about it. The atoll is only a few hundred kilometres from here. Why weren’t the bombs tested there? Why, at a cost of probably several million dollars, did an old Micronesian burial site have to be converted into a research laboratory?”

“And have it desecrated!” Dr Svenson angrily interjected. “I can’t even think how many archaeological finds have been destroyed forever by this! Even the mummified dead were spared. Why, Olin? To protect your beloved bombs from the wind and the weather?”

“They are not my beloved bombs.” Olin looked up. For the first time, he responded to the accusation. “First, they are not bombs at all, they are missiles. And secondly, I have nothing to do with them. I’m here to save you.”

Dr Svenson laughed shrilly. “Save us? That’s the most pretentious thing I’ve ever heard, Mr Olin. We don’t need to be saved, believe me, especially from the truth.”

“Not from the truth. But from the curse of the Island of Death.”

Her laughter became even more shrill. “Of course! The curse! How could I forget that?”

But Jupiter pinched his lower lip and said: “It is real. It really exists.”

“Excuse me?” Pete gasped.

“The curse is real,” Jupiter continued. “That’s why the island was abandoned, isn’t it, Mr Olin?”

Olin nodded.

“What nonsense!” cried Juan. “What are you doing? Revenge of the Micronesian spirits?”

“Nobody knows that for sure,” Olin replied. “But there have been deaths—many deaths. After the facility was completed, almost half of the men who worked here died.”

“From what?” asked Jupiter.

“There were several reasons—heart failure, kidney bleeding, cancer. It happened very quickly.”

“And when exactly was that?” Dr Svenson asked.

“When this tomb was first discovered, no bodies were found. It had been suspected that the tomb had been looted decades or centuries before. Therefore, nobody had any scruples about using the underground chambers, Dr Svenson. But when everything was finished and the actual work was about to begin, the burial cave and the coffins were discovered by pure chance. Soon after that, the dying began.”

“And you expect us to believe that?” Juan asked.

“I don’t care what you believe, Juan.”

“What about you, Mr Olin?” Jupiter interrupted.

“Like I said, I had nothing to do with this,” Olin replied. “I don’t work for the military. I’m just here to save you all from the same fate. Certain death befalls all who have been on Makatao for too long.” He looked over at Anne. “It’s already starting.”

Anne opened her eyes in horror. “What... what do you mean?”

“Why do you think you got sick all of a sudden?” Olin said. “You disturbed the rest of the dead like the rest of us here. It’s the curse. Even Mr Hadden knew that. Don’t you think he would have come here himself to get what he wanted instead of leaving it to the people of Sphinx? He was afraid of the curse. And with good reason.”

“Stop scaring her,” hissed Dr Svenson. “With your horror stories about the revenge of the dead, you can scare others, but not us.”

“It’s not my problem if you’re afraid of the truth, Dr Svenson.”

“While we are on the subject of truth,” Jupiter tried to steer the conversation in another direction, “you were talking about Mr Hadden. He knew about the weapons that were stored here?”

“Yes. At first, he had only a vague guess. Because of the many rumours and legends surrounding Makatao, he suspected that something valuable must be hidden on the island. So he sent Professor Phoenix, Albert and Anne to explore the tomb. When they radioed him what they had discovered, Hadden began extensive research. He’s a rich man. He can do a lot with money. And that’s how he learned what was supposed to remain a secret. The US military has established a secret base here and stored missiles. You know the rest of the story—a new ship, a new team, the equipment and so on.”

Jupiter nodded. “So that’s how Hadden came across this. But questions still remained unanswered. Hadden didn’t trust the second team. So he hid the information where the secret door was and how to open it in Bob’s memory. But you knew about the cave... and I assume that you opened one of the coffin and took out the missile. You lied when you said you smuggled a bomb here aboard the *Explorer*. In reality, it was a missile that came from the cave.”

Olin nodded silently.

“How did you know about the cave?” Jupiter continued questioning. “Who are you really? And what is your job here?”

“As I said, to save you from the curse.”

“You still want to talk about this?” Juan exclaimed annoyingly.

“It’s the truth.”

“But not the whole truth,” Phoenix surmised.

“That’s right.”

“Then tell us the whole story!” the professor demanded.

Olin sighed and lowered his head. He was silent—so long that Jupiter no longer expected to get a single word out of him.

But then he said: “It has become impossible to keep a secret in this world. The military has not succeeded. Although Project Spider was classified at the highest level, some of it has leaked out. Otherwise, Mr Hadden never would have known about it. Not to mention the secret door to the burial cave.

“Someone has leaked information, probably in return for a generous bribe. It doesn’t matter who it was. What matters is that the secret is no

longer a secret. But Mr Hadden made mistakes, too. From the moment the *Montana* arrived, we knew you were here. And why.”

“Who are ‘we’?” Bob asked.

“I work for the CIA,” Olin said.

Bob winced. The CIA! Jelena! Slowly the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. “And how did you know all this?”

Olin, who was still tied up, looked upwards with a nod. “Satellites. Every spot on Earth can be observed from space at any time of the day or night.

“Makatao has satellite surveillance. Whenever a ship approaches the island, it is immediately registered and its route traced. In the last four years since the facility was abandoned, seven ships have docked at Makatao. Six of them were harmless adventurers or vacationers who spent half a day in the jungle and then left again. The seventh was the *Montana*. The CIA quickly found out that it was Hadden’s ship and that he was planning to plunder the site. The plan was to send a combat unit here and make sure that nothing the crew of the *Montana* saw on the island gets out.”

“Just to make sure of that?” Dr Svenson asked lurking. “What does that mean? Do they want to arrest Professor Phoenix, Albert and Anne?”

Olin was silent. An ominous silence.

“No,” Phoenix replied in his place. “Not arrest... Eliminate.”

Dr Svenson gasped for breath, frightened. “You mean...”

“Call it what you will,” Phoenix said gloomily. “In any case, it would ensure that the three of us would not tell anyone about our discovery. That is what you meant, isn’t it, Mr Olin?”

Olin nodded.

“You pig!” cried Maria Svenson and took a threatening step towards the bound man.

“It’s not me!” Olin defended himself. “Like I said, I had nothing to do with it.”

“He’s telling the truth,” said Jupiter. “Absurd as it sounds, but he’s one of the good guys. You tried to save us, Mr Olin. On the one hand from the curse, on the other hand from... the men who want to keep the secret of Makatao at all costs.”

“That’s right. When I saw how ruthless they wanted to do it, I objected. I argued that Mr Hadden was guaranteed to look for his people

and that the problem would only be postponed, not rectified. Eventually, I prevailed.”

“So what was your suggestion?” Jupiter asked.

“I made it clear to those responsible that there is no danger as long as no one discovers the burial cave. Until then, all this would be nothing but a mysterious facility for which some other explanation could be given. So I suggested that I infiltrate Sphinx, get on the *Explorer*, and make sure that you all leave the island as soon as possible.”

Jupiter nodded. “By sabotaging the whole mission.”

“Right. Although they thought my plan was daring, they let me proceed. But then Anne discovered me and in a spontaneous reaction, I knocked her down and dragged her downstairs. I was at a loss as to what to do.”

“The question was quickly resolved,” Pete noted. “Jupiter got wise to you. The game is over.”

“When you found me, I saw that my last chance was to pretend to blow up the whole facility. I just wanted to shut you out so you’d get off the island.” He lowered his head. “But it didn’t work.”

Those present relaxed a little. So now they had learned the truth. Olin had opened up and the Makatao secret was revealed...

Almost—because Jupiter had a bad feeling. Something was still not right. There was this curse... Was it really true that this facility was abandoned because of a series of unexplained deaths? Or was there something else behind it?

And then there was something else... The picture Olin had given them was crooked, something didn’t fit, something was missing. And finally it dawned on Jupiter why this still could not have been the whole truth.

“Mr Olin,” he said as calmly as possible. “One thing I’m still not clear about, though, is that Makatao could easily have been declared a restricted area, just like Kwajalein. A few fences to prevent anyone from going ashore or a patrol boat, that would have been enough... Or even simpler, you could have built the whole facility on Kwajalein. Why wasn’t that done?”

“Capacity on Kwajalein is exhausted. The atoll is quite small, there was simply no room for another test area.”

Jupiter narrowed his eyes. “I don’t believe you. Even if this is true, that’s no argument for strict secrecy. There are enough other uninhabited islands that the US had access to. It would have been no problem to

declare them military area as well. Everyone knows missiles are being tested on Kwajalein. But Makatao was kept secret from the rest of the world. Why was Project Spider top secret?"

Olin did not answer. But Jupiter looked at his face and saw that there was a truth that had not yet been spoken.

"Oh, my gosh," Bob suddenly whispered.

Everyone turned to him. "What is it?" Phoenix asked.

"The bombs... Or missiles, or whatever. I told you I saw pictures of them in the papers."

"Yeah. So?" Phoenix probed further.

"'Top secret' was the key word. Now I remember what that report was about."

"Which is?" Phoenix asked.

"It was a very long article on the history of US nuclear testing." Bob turned to Olin and watched his face very closely when he said: "What's down there in hundreds of stone coffins are not simple missile. They are nuclear missiles!"

## 7. Dirty Deal

There was a twitch on Olin's face. That was enough.

"What?" cried Dr Svenson. "Is it true? Nuclear missiles? Is that true, Olin? I said, is it true?"

"Is it true, Olin?" Phoenix joined in. "Answer me!"

"Not quite," Olin replied.

Dr Svenson exploded: "Not quite?"

"It's not what you would consider a nuclear missile."

"I think I know what he means," Bob said. "In this article, a new type of missile was mentioned. It is equipped with nuclear warheads, but they are far from having the same explosive power as nuclear bombs."

Olin nodded. "Not comparable to the very first nuclear weapons. So it's not another Hiroshima."

"They are still nuclear weapons!" cried Dr Svenson. "We are talking about nuclear weapons! What madness was planned here?"

"I didn't develop these weapons," Olin defended himself.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" cried Pete. "What's going on here? You mean we've been running around a huge nuclear weapon depot for days? Are you crazy?"

Olin was silent.

Jupiter tried to get the story in order. "You were to make sure that the existence of the missiles is kept secret. But why? Bob has even read about them in the newspapers."

"I think I'm getting the hang of this," Bob said. "The article said this new type of missile had been developed but had not yet been tested. The government banned these tests in the old test areas in the Nevada desert after massive civil protests. After all, there are already enough weapons, no one needs a new one.

"And the testing of nuclear weapons is always associated with a considerable security risk. No matter when, how or where you try to detonate them—radioactive radiation is always released, one way or another."

"What happened next?" Pete asked.



“If I recall correctly, the planned test series were cancelled and the entire project overturned.”

“At least that’s what they wanted the public to believe.” Jupiter turned angrily to Olin. “It’s true, isn’t it? Under our feet are the missiles that were banned from testing. The tests were to be conducted in secret, here on Makatao.”

Olin said nothing, but his silence was answer enough.

“But why not,” growled Jupiter sarcastically. “After all, this is nothing new. For decades, the Americans, the French, they have all abused their colonies in the Pacific for nuclear tests. Why endanger the people and nature at home when you can instead blow up a few insignificant islands or contaminate them for hundreds of thousands of years? And all this in the service of science to develop new weapons to be used in new wars that nobody really wants. But one has to be prepared, right, Mr Olin? The enemy can be everywhere.”

Maria Svenson spat contemptuously. “That’s the biggest mess I’ve ever heard of! The last nuclear tests of the US in the Pacific took place in 1962! At that time, the government promised never again to use the Pacific islands for such tests! Oh, what am I talking about? Nuclear weapons! Nothing in this world is more superfluous!”

“But that’s not the issue here,” Mr Olin broke his silence. “It’s that you were all close to exposing a highly classified military project. That had to be stopped at all costs.”

“No,” contradicted Dr Svenson and paced up and down. “That’s not the point. The point is that this is a huge scam. It’s about the US government lying to its people. And it has to go public!”

“There were no explosions. Before the actual test series was to begin, this base was abandoned due to the deaths,” Olin said. “In the meantime, the entire Project Spider was abandoned. It’s a fossil, if you will. A fossil from a time when it was believed that more types of weapons had to be developed as the political situation in some countries worsened.”

“I don’t care if the tests were done or not, if the project was abandoned or not. And it certainly doesn’t matter who these weapons were intended to be used against,” Maria Svenson snapped.

“They should not be used at all!” Olin continued. “It was a purely defensive measure, which—”

“Stop it!” she shouted. “Offence or defence is always a matter of position. Nothing more than rhetorical quibbles that only serve to soothe

the consciences of the people responsible for these decisions. It is and always will be fraud, betrayal and a huge mess!” Maria Svenson built herself up threateningly in front of the tied-up man and for a moment it looked as if she would strike out and beat him. Then she turned abruptly and stormed out of the command centre.

Bob kicked a pebble over the moss-covered stone slabs and it rolled into a bush. A few mosquitoes swarmed up. Mosquitoes. Soon the sun would set and thousands of these critters would come out again and pounce mercilessly on everything that had blood in its veins. Attack of the killer insects. Like bombs, they would fall on him and cause dozens of small explosions on his skin. It was actually time to return to the protective command centre.

But Bob wouldn’t go back. Ever. His stomach turned at the thought of what was under his feet in the stone coffins.

Television pictures went through his head—footages of nuclear explosions. How, after a brilliant flash of lightning, a gigantic mushroom cloud arched towards the sky. How the shock wave shattered trees and houses. Reports of radioactive fallout contaminating vast areas. It was about bombs that exploded on the atolls of Micronesia, hurling millions of fish from the lagoon high into the air, which then rained down on the surrounding islands... It was about thousands of Micronesians who were driven from their homes and could never return... It was about people with radiation poisoning, radioactive burns, sky-rocketing cancer rates...

Bob wanted to get out of here. He wanted to wake up from this nightmare and forget it as quickly as possible. But it was impossible. He had to deal with the issue. It was only because Dr Svenson was right—the story had to be made public. His thoughts were swept from him by an agitated tirade of voices.

He returned to the others who, except for Olin, were now outside the facility. They stood in the shadow of a monolith and argued with each other. Bob could barely hear Schwartz saying: “Mr Hadden paid us for this job! He has been the main financier of Sphinx for years. If we don’t get this job done, Sphinx is dead.”

“You can’t be serious!” cried Dr Svenson. “You really want to give him the weapons?”

“That’s our job, isn’t it?” Schwartz replied coolly.

“I just don’t believe this.” Dr Svenson wasn’t the only one who got excited. Pete, Albert and Juan also talked to Mr Schwartz. Only Anne, Jupiter and Professor Phoenix held back.

“Do you even know what you’re saying?” cried Pete. “These are nuclear weapons! Do you have any idea what Hadden is planning on doing with them?”

“He’ll want to sell it, I suppose,” Schwartz said.

“And then some madman has control of hundreds of nuclear weapons. Doesn’t that scare you?” Bob shouted.

“In this case, I agree with Dr Svenson,” Schwartz said. “I couldn’t care less who they’re used against.”

“What if it’s against us?” the Second Investigator exploded. “What if Hadden is selling these things to terrorists? Then what?”

“That’s not the point,” Schwartz replied.

“Then what the point?” Pete shouted back.

“It’s about business. I was paid by Hadden, so I do his job, simple as that.”

“You have a real mercenary soul,” said Dr Svenson scornfully. “You would change sides immediately if someone paid you more, wouldn’t you?”

“No,” Schwartz claimed. “It’s not a question of money, but of honour. When I give my word to someone, I keep it. And Hadden has my word that I will bring him what is hidden on Makatao.”

“Then you can bring him the few old computers down there,” Pete suggested. “And say you didn’t find anything else.”

Schwartz ignored him. “What’s your plan, Dr Svenson?”

“We’ll leave the weapons here, go home and make the story public,” Svenson said. “This island is a hair’s breath away from disaster. Without the deaths, the weapons would have been detonated. We owe it entirely to chance that this did not happen... And someone must be held accountable.”

Schwartz smiled viciously. “You are so stubborn that you are incapable of thinking any further. Have you ever thought about what will happen if we go back and make a big deal about it? Then it’s our turn, all of us! After all, our presence on Makatao alone is illegal, not to mention our plans and everything we have done in the past. Everything will come out and every single one of us will go to jail. You’ve been there before, if I may remind you, Dr Svenson. Would you like to go back to your cell?”

She was adamant. "That's not my argument," she finally said quietly. "This is about higher interests than saving our own heads."

"You may see that in your idealistic narrow-mindedness, but I don't. I care more about my own head," Schwartz argued.

"Important enough to risk these weapons going off somewhere in the near future?" Svenson hit back.

"The world is bad, Dr Svenson," Schwartz evaded the question. "There's nothing you or I can do about it, no matter what we do."

Bob was as horrified as the others about Schwartz's opinion, but he noticed that Jupiter held back conspicuously and thoughtfully worked on his lower lip while he seemed to follow the conversation with only one ear.

Bob moved to him, pulled him aside and whispered: "What's the matter, Jupe? What's going on inside you?"

"Something is wrong here," Jupiter said just as quietly.

"What do you think?" Bob asked.

"This whole story is still not complete. This facility, the missiles, Olin's talk about trying to save us... it all sounds reasonable, but I can't shake the feeling that something is still missing."

"What makes you think of that?" Bob wanted to know.

"I don't know. It just seems illogical to me that..."

"What are you two whispering about?" Unnoticed, Pete had sneaked up from behind. "Isn't it unbelievable what kind of garbage Schwartz is spewing? He wants to take those weapons so Hadden can sell them! That's got to be the dirtiest deal I have ever heard of. What do you say?"

"Jupe is thinking," Bob evaded the subject.

"Really? What are you thinking, Jupe?"

"That I'm actually quite grateful to Schwartz for the garbage he's whipped up," Jupe said. "He's given me an idea."

"Which is?" Bob asked.

Jupiter remained silent and continued to pinch his lower lip.

Slowly his face darkened. "We have to talk to Olin."

"Why is that?" Pete asked.

"Because I have a very bad hunch," Jupiter said. "And he's the only one who can confirm or refute it. Come on, fellas."

The others were still arguing and paid no attention to The Three Investigators as they moved away from the group and returned to the altar. They went into the command centre where Olin was still tied to a chair, this time unguarded.

“Have you been sent to see if the traitor has not yet escaped?” Olin enquired bitingly.

“No, we’ve come to talk to you, Mr Olin,” Jupe said.

“Really? I thought I’d be treated with contempt now for the rest of my days. If only I had been silent, they would have continued to look after me instead of leaving me sitting here alone for hours. Alone and thirsty, did I mention that?”

Jupiter reached for a bottle of water that was on the table and put it to Mr Olin’s lips.

Then Jupiter began: “I’m not sure if you actually broke your silence. In fact, I have the impression that you’re still hiding something from us.”

“Really?” Olin smiled ambiguously. “What could that be?”

“For example, that the missiles here are completely harmless and therefore worthless.”

“What?” cried Pete, stunned. “What do you mean, Jupe? But I thought they have nuclear warheads?”

“Yes, those are missiles, but who said that the nuclear warheads are still in them?” Jupiter said.

“What... what do you mean? I thought...” Pete wondered.

“You can remove the actual warhead, the thing that makes the missile so dangerous—like the bullets in a gun. And I think that’s exactly what has been done here. Right, Mr Olin? You can answer. Otherwise, I’m just gonna go downstairs and check.”

“You’re a smart boy,” Olin admitted. “How did you come up with that?”

“Well, it’s not too hard to draw the right conclusions. You just have to take the time to think about it. This facility has been abandoned, but that was not done hastily, but thoughtfully. It is true that no effort was made to dismantle the entire computer system and the beds and cupboards in the quarters, but all the personal belongings, all the documents, everything that would have provided information about the purpose of this facility were taken away.

“But nobody, absolutely nobody, leaves dozens of nuclear warheads on a deserted island. Not even if it were cursed by all the spirits of the world. No matter how safe the hiding place is, nuclear weapons are not the sort of thing you accidentally leave behind. And you don’t intentionally leave them unguarded because you think they won’t be discovered anyway... No way.”

Bob nodded slowly. "You're absolutely right, Jupe. But we could have thought of that earlier. But then why were the missiles left behind?"

"Probably for the same reason the computers and other stuff are still here. It would have been too cumbersome and taken too long to move everything. It would not have been possible to remove all traces completely anyway, unless the facility is blown up, and even that would not have been enough. Am I right, Mr Olin?"

The bound man nodded. "Every single word."

"So then the issue was never one of preventing Mr Hadden from getting his hands on dangerous nuclear weapons. Your job was simply to make sure that no one could discover the secret of Makatao."

"I never said anything else."

"Well, then they can continue their discussion up there until late at night," said Pete. "It doesn't matter now anyway. There is no loot. Schwartz won't like that. And certainly not Hadden."

Olin smiled. It was a smile that Jupiter did not like—a smile that Olin was not really entitled to. He seemed certain of victory, but he had just lost and even revealed his last secrets... or almost his last, because there was still something. The very last piece of the puzzle was missing. And so Jupiter dared to express his worst fears.

"There is a Plan B, isn't there?" he asked.

"I don't know what you mean," Olin replied.

"Yes, you do. You know you do. You said that originally a combat unit was to be sent here to make sure no secret left the island. However, you were able to push through your plan to drive us off the island before we could discover anything. But surely you did not get that approved without a back-up plan. So there is a Plan B, which comes into effect if you fail with your plan. If that is the case, the combat unit will be dispatched, won't they? They will come to make sure that none of us can breathe a word about the evil machinations of the government and the military."

Olin looked at him silently. His expression was hard to interpret. It was a mixture of satisfaction and regret. But one thing was certain—Jupiter had hit the mark.

"When?" asked Jupiter.

"Has the sun gone down yet?"

"Any minute now."

“Then it’s too late. I had two days to get you off the island. I told them right away that it was not much time, but that’s all they wanted me to get involved in. The island is still being watched by satellite. If the *Explorer* and *Montana* have not left by sunset on the second day, it is a sign for the soldiers stationed on Kwajalein to come here.”

“My gosh! We have to get out of here now, Jupe!” cried Pete. “Right away! The *Explorer*’s fast. We can outrun them.

Olin shook his head. “They won’t come by boat. They’ll come by helicopter. They’ll be here in an hour.”

## 8. Concealed Fouls

Jupiter walked up and down with wide, echoing steps, his hands crossed behind his back. Every turn was powerful, every movement of the head energetic. Like a sergeant, Bob thought. And somehow he was. He marched back and forth in front of his small huddled group of two detectives, six archaeologists and a bound traitor, trying to motivate them to fight.

“We’re wasting time!” cried Dr Svenson repeatedly. “I say we get out of here as fast as we can.”

“We don’t stand a chance against the helicopters,” Jupiter rejected the suggestion. “They will intercept us before Makatao is out of sight.”

“For once, I agree with the fat... the boy,” said Juan. “We will not run away like cowardly dogs. We will fight!”

“Oh, stop it, Juan! ‘We will not run away like cowardly dogs.’ When did I hear that! Have you seen too many movies?” Dr Svenson mocked. “What do you want to do? Be a hero? *High Noon* on Makatao? Gimme a break!”

“And you? You want to stay here and be sitting ducks?” Juan hit back.

“A fight is just as out of the question as escape,” Jupiter interrupted the discussion. “Or how do you imagine it? Do you intend to attack an army of soldiers by ambush? With what? With a lasso made of vines?”

“I’m armed,” Juan replied and pulled out his gun. “Albert and our esteemed Mr Olin as well.”

“Three guns,” said Dr Svenson. “So it comes down to a Western movie after all. That’s great. Here you are, I like to play the barmaid hiding behind the counter. You go ahead and mess with the Army, but leave me out of it.”

“Then let the fat boy make a suggestion!” Juan shouted. “Or why does he strut up and down here like an officer?”

Jupiter stopped abruptly. “I do indeed have some ideas.”

“Let’s hear it,” demanded Professor Phoenix. “We don’t have much time left, if Olin is right. Forty-five minutes.”



“All right. We have a decisive advantage on our side. The soldiers think they can surprise us. But they can’t. We’ll turn the tables. We’ll give them a few surprises—from an ambush. We can’t afford fair play. We’ll have to come up with some concealed fouls. It’s the only way we can beat them.”

“Very vague,” Albert thought. “Can you be more specific?”

“Of course. But in order to do that, we need to know as much about the opponent as possible.” He turned to Olin. “You wanted to stop this from happening. You wanted to save us and get us off the island in time. But we were more interested in the truth, and we thwarted your plans. Whose side are you on now?”

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“Does that mean you’ll help us?” Jupe asked.

He hesitated. Then a nod.

“Wait a minute!” cried Juan. “Does that mean we should trust this guy? He is a traitor! He’s proved that more than once!”

“But he is the only one who can help us now,” said Jupiter sharply.

“I don’t give a damn what he says!” Juan shouted back.

The First Investigator ignored him. “How many soldiers will come?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a dozen... or more than that.”

“With how many helicopters?”

“Two, maybe three.”

“There are only two possible landing places on the island—the crater and the small beach where the *Explorer* is anchored. Where will they land?”

“I don’t know. In the crater, I suppose. But they won’t leave the ship unguarded.”

“What does that mean?”

“They’ll probably drop two or three people on the beach and then fly to the top of the island.”

“I assume both groups will be in constant radio contact?”

“Yes.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. He turned to Professor Phoenix and asked: “What about the *Montana*? Is it so well hidden that you can’t see it from the air?”

“Not really,” Phoenix said. “But at night. I don’t think they’ll see the ship in the dark.”

“Hold on,” Bob interjected. “But you know that the *Montana* is hidden in the bay. After all, they get all the information from the surveillance satellite. They know the locations of both ships.”

“That’s right, Bob,” Jupe said. “But they can’t land there. It’s full of sharp rocks and dense jungle. And I don’t think they’ll go overland to the bay in the dark. Since the *Explorer* is in an exposed position, they will guard it. That means we’ll have to take the *Montana*.”

“What does that mean now?” Juan asked. “We are going to escape, aren’t we?”

“Yes. But only after we have immobilized the soldiers.”

“We shoot them in the legs?”

“Goodness,” moaned Dr Svenson. “You really have violent fantasies!”

“No. But we’ll make sure they can’t follow us by sea or by air,” Jupiter said.

Professor Phoenix frowned. “Even if we could do this—and I don’t see how we could—how would it help us? They will contact the Kwajalein military base by radio and request immediate reinforcements. They’ll be here by helicopter in an hour. We won’t get far in an hour.”

“We have to delay them somehow,” said Jupiter. “We need just a few hours head start, and that should be enough.”

“But where shall we run to?” Pete asked. “On the open sea, we are easy prey. It’ll take us a week to get to California.”

“We’re not going to California,” Jupe said. “We’re going to Pohnpei. It’ll take us eight hours to get there. And there’s a direct flight from there to Los Angeles at 8 am tomorrow morning. If we catch the plane, we’re safe. They will hardly dare attack us in the air.”

“So we still have until midnight to get away from Makatao,” Bob noted and took a look at his watch. “Three and a half hours in which we have to keep the soldiers busy somehow. How are we going to do that?”

“First, two or three of us have to go down to the beach and cripple the *Explorer* so that the soldiers cannot use it to follow us. Also, the motorboat must be moved. So we’ll take it to the bay next to the *Montana*, as soon as possible. Al? Do you think you can do it?”

“No problem,” Al nodded. “After all, that’s why Mr Hadden chose me for this expedition. I’m the only one who really knows about ships.”

Jupiter nodded contentedly. “Everyone here has a task. Pete, you accompany Al. Once you reach the bay, board the *Montana*. Best you take Anne with you.”

“That’s a good idea,” Anne tiredly agreed. “As much as I’d like to help you, but I’m afraid I’ll be lucky if I can make it to the ship without collapsing.”

“And Mr Olin will accompany you as well. Take him aboard the *Montana* and tie him up good and tight. And he’ll be no more trouble.”

“Hey!” cried Olin. “What’s that supposed to mean? I helped you, after all!”

“I’m sorry, Mr Olin, but my trust doesn’t extend that far,” Jupe said. “Let’s go, people, we don’t have much time!”

Jupiter stepped behind the chair to which Olin was tied and loosened the restraints. He got up. His hands were still tied behind his back. “And don’t let him get away!”

“Don’t worry, Jupe, we’ll deal with him,” Pete assured the audience. “But what’s the plan? What do we do after we sabotage the *Explorer*, hide the motorboat and set up camp on *Montana*?”

“Wait. Nothing but wait. If all goes well, we will join you within the hour and then leave. Now go on, get out of here.”

Pete nodded at the First Investigator and headed for the stairs with Albert, Anne and Mr Olin.

“Oh, Pete? Just a minute,” Jupe called out to Pete.

Pete paused while the others left the command centre. Jupiter walked towards him and whispered something in his ear. The Second Investigator’s eyes widen, then he nodded and followed the others out.

“What did you tell him?” Juan asked suspiciously.

“That he should also keep an eye on Albert and Anne,” replied Jupiter. “Better safe than sorry.”

“And who has an eye on you? Who tells us you’re not trying to trap us? You show up here with your friend out of nowhere, telling us one adventurous story after another, and now you want us to do your bidding.”

“I am the only one who has made constructive suggestions so far,” replied Jupiter coolly.

“The boy is right,” said Professor Phoenix. “So far his plan sounds promising. At least the first part. But I am very excited about the second one. We still have about half an hour left. What are you up to, Jupiter?”

The First Investigator smiled. “Very simple. We set the coffee table.”

“Excuse me?” Phoenix remarked.

“What I’m trying to say is that we’ll give our visitors a very nice reception.”

Bob looked at his watch. Then up into the sky. Then back at his watch. It was dark by now. And they had seven minutes left. Then it would show if Jupiter's plan worked—assuming that Olin had told the truth this time.

A few annoying mosquitoes were buzzing around in front of Bob's face. He scared them away. Damn! Jupiter had insisted that they retreat into the jungle and lay in wait there.

"I don't care about the searchlights," growled Juan next to him. "Here in the undergrowth, it's unbearable! I'm all bitten up already! I'll go down into the crater and hide behind the boulders!"

"You'll do no such thing!" Professor Phoenix's voice could not be disputed. "We must not be discovered under any circumstances! We want the soldiers to think that we're all in the tomb. And that's the way it should stay."

Bob turned to him. The professor was crouched right behind him with Mr Schwartz. In the faint moonlight, his scarred face looked even more terrifying than usual.

Juan hummed something incomprehensible, but stayed where he was. They waited.

Bob was worried sick about Jupiter and Dr Svenson, but he remained silent. He didn't want to appear childish.

Suddenly a hand came up from behind Bob's shoulder. It was Professor Phoenix. "Don't worry, son. Your friend Jupiter is a smart boy." He laughed softly. "I'm not sure about Pete, but I know you can rely on Albert and Anne one hundred percent."

Phoenix had obviously read his mind. Bob wanted to reply, but then he heard a noise. A humming sound, far away. But it was coming closer and fast. From the muffled sound, a rapid rattling sound emerged. "Here they come!"

The rattling became louder and louder, and suddenly it was right above them. Bob couldn't see much through the thick canopy of leaves. Just a few red dots flying over them. There were two helicopters. Luckily, only two.

They crossed the crater, then the roar of their rotors became quieter again.

"They are searching the island's shoreline," Professor Phoenix surmised. "Just like Mr Olin said."

"Hopefully Pete and the others are safe," Bob said worriedly.

It lasted a few minutes, then they came back. This time they flew much lower. So low that the trees swayed under the turbulent air. Suddenly, the bright beam of a spotlight tore the darkness apart, groping for a moment over the jungle and finally over the crater. A second spotlight appeared. They were looking for a suitable landing place.

Very close to the altar there was a free area where there were no ruins or stone blocks. Like two giant black insects, the helicopters circled the area and finally descended. The metal runners scraped over the stone as they touched down. Then the engines were switched off.

The spotlights bathed the place of worship in an unreal light. It became even more unreal when the doors opened and darkly-dressed men jumped out and ducked down to safety in front of the spinning rotor blades. A few metres away, they lined up in a row.

Five men in dark green military uniforms, all with caps pulled low on their faces and shouldered rifles. The spotlights went out and the two pilots joined them. Seven men. The sound of the engine died away, the rotors stopped. An eighth man with a very bright flashlight came out last, stood up in front of the other seven and spoke to them. He had to be the commander.

Bob was too far away to hear them, but it was clear that the commander was giving orders. For half a minute, he talked to the soldiers, then he pointed over to the altar and the men ran off. Only two of them stayed behind and took their position next to the helicopters.

It was frightening to see the determination and self-confidence with which the rest of the troop took position around the altar. They knew exactly what to do. There was not a moment of hesitation, not a moment of disorientation. Everything was perfectly in tune, as if they had practised this manoeuvre a hundred times before. Maybe they had indeed.

The commander bent down, pushed on the magic circle and the altar door opened. Half of the men illuminated the tunnel with flashlights, the others had their rifles ready and aimed at the opening in the ground. Then six soldiers disappeared one by one into the depths.

Half a minute later, the altar door closed with a stone crunch and silence returned.

Dead silence.

## 9. The Black Monster

When Albert started the motorboat, Pete flinched. It boomed so loud that probably half the Pacific woke up. At least. Then the Second Investigator called himself to order. Before a soldier in a helicopter heard a motorboat in the sky, the detective in the motorboat would hear the helicopter. He's sure of it. So don't panic.

Next to him was Mr Olin. Anne crouched in the sand. The descent to the beach had been exhausting for her. She breathed heavily and wiped the sweat from her brow. Albert steered the boat over to the *Explorer*, moored it there and climbed on deck.

Then he disappeared for ten minutes. He probably went to engine room to shut down the ship. When he came back, he had a big grin on his face. "This ship won't be moving anywhere for a long time."

"What did you do?" Pete asked.

Albert put his index finger on his lips and nodded over to Olin, who stood apathetically by the water. "The enemy is listening! Let's put it this way, I made sure that our dear friends will need a few hours to even understand what is malfunctioned—let alone repair it."

"Okay, let's get out of here!" Pete helped Anne on board the motorboat. Afterwards he supported Olin, who had difficulties with his balance because of his shackles. He pushed the boat a bit into the water, jumped in and Albert accelerated.

They stayed close to the shore. Pete shone a flashlight on the rocks while Al steered the boat.

After a short time, the bay appeared in front of them. A narrow passage between two large rocks that rose dismissively into the night sky.

A muffled sound frightened Pete. "What was that?"

Al grinned. "You'll see. No fear, nothing dangerous."

The throbbing repeated. It sounded like someone was deliberately hitting a giant anvil.

"This is where you manoeuvred the *Montana*?" Pete marvelled as they crossed the passage. "Well done."

“The *Montana* is a little smaller than the *Explorer*,” explained Anne. “Just a little.”

“We can get it out of here, but it won’t be a blitz start,” Al added. “That’s what we have to be prepared for.”

“We could get the ship into position so far that we only have to accelerate when it matters,” Pete suggested.

“But then no one can climb aboard,” Al replied. “No, we have to wait until everyone is here before we start the engine.”

The motorboat chugged around the bend at minimum speed. Pete shone into the darkness. A black wall rose from the water in front of them. It was smooth and straight. It was the hull of the *Hadden Montana*.

The ship was much bigger than Pete had thought. It looked even bigger than the *Explorer*. But that was probably because it had been squeezed between the rocks. Like a huge, black monster in a cage that was too small. It was waiting to be woken by them and break it out of its prison.

There! There was that thud again! Now Pete understood what was causing the noise. It was the hull of the ship that kept ramming the rocks with the light swell. Not strong enough to take damage, but the sound was still eerie. The steel hull of the *Montana* was a huge sounding body that vibrated like a bell.

Al manoeuvred the motorboat as close as possible to the ship without being crushed by its rocking movements and tied the mooring rope to a rocky outcrop. From here they could climb over the rocks relatively easily until they reached deck level.

To do this Pete had to remove Mr Olin’s restraints. “Don’t make any trouble,” he advised him, trying to put as much determination and toughness into his voice as possible. “You don’t have a gun anymore and there are three of us.”

Instead of answering, Olin just smiled ambiguously, rubbed his wrists and began his ascent. Albert and Anne were in front, Pete behind him. The Second Investigator expected an escape attempt at any moment, but Olin remained calm.

A wooden gangplank was hidden in a crack in the rock. Al pulled it out and laid it as a bridge between the rocks and the railing. Once they were on board, they took Olin below deck. Pete tied him to a chair.

“I’m going to lie down,” Anne said. “I am exhausted to death.”

“All right. And we’ll wait. That’s all we can do now anyway—” Pete interrupted himself and listened.

Helicopters!

“There you are! Come on, Al, to the deck!” Pete exclaimed.

They ran up the stairs to the deck just in time to see two helicopters turn on the spotlights and search the jungle. They flew in a straight line down the slope of the volcano towards the water. But instead of going to the beach and the *Explorer*, they turned in the other direction, stayed in the air for a moment and then flew parallel to the coast—straight towards them!

They were fast, very fast. Only a few seconds and the helicopters were close enough to cover the *Montana* with their spotlights. Deafeningly loud, they hovered over the ship, the air pressed down and rippled the water.

Pete and Al squeezed themselves into the shadow of the stairway structure as the spotlight cones slowly scanned the deck and came closer. Closer and closer...

“They’ll find us,” whispered Pete. It was too late to escape below deck. One movement and the spotlights would catch them immediately!

Literally at the last second, the helicopters turned off and flew back towards the *Explorer*. The Second Investigator breathed again. “That was close. Just a little further and...”

“That went well,” Al remarked.

In the distance, the helicopters circled over the beach. One went down and disappeared behind a rock. A minute later, it rose again.

“They probably dropped some soldiers to guard the *Explorer*,” Al said. “Just like Mr Olin said. “Now they’re going up to the crater.”

But Al was wrong. Instead of moving directly to the top of the volcanic mountain, the helicopters flew slowly up the slope and illuminated the jungle.

“They’re looking for something,” Pete wondered. “Only what?” The machines stopped in mid-air. One descended again, disappeared behind the trees and reappeared half a minute later. Then they continued on their way up and disappeared into the crater shortly afterwards.

“Strange,” Al muttered. “Looked like they dropped somebody else off there, didn’t they? In the middle of the jungle?”

Pete frowned. “That is really strange. Unless... Oh, no!”

“What?” Al asked.



The Second Investigator thought feverishly. Could that be true? Here was the *Montana*, there was the *Explorer*, there were stone stairs leading to the crater. And the place where the helicopter had landed...

"This is a catastrophe."

"What?"

"They didn't land in the middle of the jungle!"

"Then what?"

"At the end of the skeleton tunnel!"

"I think I hear something!"

Jupiter paused and listened. For seconds, he and Dr Svenson didn't dare breathe. But all he heard was the hum of the generator and his own heartbeat.

"That damn generator!" growled Dr Svenson. "An armada of military helicopters could land on us, and we wouldn't hear it."

"We can't shut down the generator or our plan won't work," Jupiter said.

"I know that too, smart guy! How long do you need?"

"Almost done." Jupiter loosened the last screw on the computer chassis. Then he removed the computer hard drive. "Exhibit A. Even if the secret data had been erased, I'm sure a computer expert can reconstruct enough to prove with this piece of technology that Project Spider really existed."

"All right. Let's get out of here before our friends show up," Dr Svenson said.

Jupiter left the dismantled computer as it was. There was no point in covering up traces. The soldiers knew they were here anyway. Then they could also find out what they had done.

Earlier, Jupiter had programmed the armoured door open, so there was no need for the table that was holding it open. Together with Dr Svenson, he cleared away the table, and then they made their way down.

"Let's hope the soldiers don't also get the idea of putting a table to block the armoured door," Maria Svenson pondered. "Then your ingenious plan will be worth nothing."

"They will not," replied Jupiter confidently. "Because they don't expect us to have a plan. They'll land, look around and find that there's no one on the ship and no one in the crater. Then they'll conclude that we're all down here somewhere. They'll open the altar door, search the

command centre and quarters for us, and finally conclude that we are somewhere down here. That's why I left the armoured door open, so that they'll just march right through. The important thing is, they haven't the slightest idea that we know about their visit. Therefore, they have no suspicion."

They descended the dark spiral staircase, crossed the red-lit corridor and finally reached the monitor room. Olin's missile was still there, the detonator flashed '00:00'. The monitors showed empty corridors. Jupiter sat down at the computer. What Olin had managed, he would manage. It was child's play for him! And indeed, it didn't take long before he had found access to the armoured door. Now he had to wait.

Their patience was not put to a hard test. Dr Svenson, who had been staring intently at the monitors the whole time, suddenly flinched.

"There they are!" Jupiter cried.

The screen showed the armoured door. Six soldiers entered the command centre. They searched every corner of the command centre. Satisfied, they regrouped and then entered the armoured door. All but two. They stopped at the door.

"Damn!" Jupiter cursed. "Come on, boys, what are you hanging around the door for? Be brave soldiers! Follow your comrades!"

The two soldiers outside the door did not move.

Meanwhile, the other four secured every door. The commander had a master key. Every room was opened and checked. Thus they worked their way bit by bit further and further into the labyrinth—further and further towards Jupiter and Dr Svenson!

The precision with which they proceeded was frightening. It was as if every movement was rehearsed a hundred times, nothing was left to chance. The four men worked as one person. No, not as one person, more like a machine—a heavily armed and deadly machine with only one goal—to find them.

"What shall we do now?" Dr Svenson asked.

"Wait," Jupiter said calmly.

"We can't wait much longer. In five minutes, they'll have combed the upper level. And then they'll come down. You have to close the door, Jupiter!"

"Then we have four soldiers in here and two out there. And those two can warn the rest. It's too risky. We'll wait."

"We have to get out of here in time, remember?" Dr Svenson warned.

The First Investigator did not answer. Dr Svenson was right. It was a close call. Very close. Still, he wanted to wait as long as possible.

“There! They have reached the lift! Now they probably realize it’s not working.” Jupiter watched as one of the soldiers switched on a walkie-talkie and spoke into it. Another camera had just captured the two soldiers at the armoured door. They were talking to each other on the walkie-talkie. Then the two men left their posts went through the armoured door to join the rest.

“Yes!” shouted Dr Svenson and clapped her hands. “Trap the monkeys now!”

Jupiter pressed the ‘Enter’ key on the computer. The armoured door closed. And the emergency lever would not work—he had seen to that.

The two soldiers whirled around, ran back, but it was too late—they were trapped. They tried flicking the emergency lever but nothing happened. Chaos broke out among them, but Jupiter and Dr Svenson had no time to savour the moment. They had to get out of here!

“What if they can get into this room and unlock the door with the computer?” Dr Svenson suddenly remembered.

“I’ve already thought of that.” Jupiter pushed the computer right in front of the table. Then he gave the missile a nudge. The very heavy metal cone rolled over the top, tipped over and crashed into the plastic case of the computer from a height of one metre. Hissing and sparking, it cracked like an eggshell.

“Nobody will be able to do anything with this computer. Now let’s get out of here!”

They left the monitor room, ran through the corridor and finally stood in front of the mural. Dr Svenson’s eyes lit up when she looked at the ancestral images, but Jupiter urged: “We don’t have time for this now! Perhaps one day you come back and examine everything in detail, but now we have to get out of here!”

Together they operated the opening mechanism. The archaeologist was tall and sporty. She managed to press two of the hidden buttons at the same time. The wall slid to the side. Hurriedly, they ran down the stairs into the burial cave.

“Incredible,” whispered Dr Svenson reverently as the beam of her flashlight glided across the long rows of stone coffins.

“The culture that created this must have been very advanced. Mostly coffins and burial chambers were reserved for kings or shamans. Here,

however, it looks as if everyone was given a funeral of this kind. This is extraordinary—so is the stench down here.”

With a rumble, the entrance closed behind them. Jupiter cringed. The sound was still creepy the second time.

“Hopefully the soldiers were not yet at the stairs. Otherwise they’ll know where we are.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that they also know this cave and its opening? ... That they could possibly follow us without any trouble?”

Jupiter nodded. “Yes. But it will take them a while to understand. As perfectly coordinated as they are, they have one disadvantage—the troop is inflexible. They had orders to break into the facility and get us out. Now that no longer works, they’re at a loss. At least I hope they are. Come on, there’s an exit that way.”

They ran through the cave until it became narrower. Then the skeletons came.

“That... that’s horrible!” gasped Dr Svenson as she shone her flashlight over the carcasses. Jupiter wasn’t sure whether she was talking about the desecration of the tomb as an archaeologist or about the skeletons. He was about to reply when he heard a noise.

The echo of a distant crash and crack. “Lights out!”

Dr Svenson turned off the flashlight, but it did not go completely dark. There was light coming from the tunnel in front of them. And now Jupiter recognized the strange sound—it was the breaking and bursting of bones!

Someone was running through the tunnel towards them!

Their only escape route was blocked!

## 10. The Valley of Terror

“Okay, now what?” Mr Schwartz looked over expectantly at Professor Phoenix, but he never looked back at Bob—as if he knew the answer to that question.

Bob stared down into the valley—at the black monsters that had landed in the altar area... and the two battle-ready soldiers who’d been left behind as guards.

“We’ve gotta distract them somehow,” Bob said.

“Distraction won’t be enough,” Juan said. “We must overwhelm them. Otherwise they will come back and destroy our plan right away.”

“They are armed,” reminded Mr Schwartz.

“So are we.” Juan raised his gun grimly.

“As trained soldiers, they will have no qualms about using their weapons,” continued Mr Schwartz.

“Unlike us,” Phoenix said sharply. “Get it?”

Bob nodded. “There must be another way. We’ll outsmart them.”

“And how?” Juan asked.

Bob thought. “They expect grown men and women on this island, don’t they? They don’t know that Jupiter, Pete and I are here. They have no idea that we are with you.”

“They’ll figure that out very soon,” Juan interjected.

“Unless I convince them otherwise,” Bob affirmed.

“If they even let you talk...” Juan continued.

“I’m just a boy. I’m no danger to them,” Bob said. “If they see a boy, they won’t shoot. Right?”

“All right. Let’s give it a try,” Phoenix agreed and they briefly discussed their strategy.

Bob’s heart was beating up to his neck as he walked towards the soldiers. He kicked around the corner of a crumbling wall. The helicopters towered over him like giant black insects.

The two soldiers were immediately on alert. In a flash, they had their rifles at the ready and were aiming at Bob.

“Freeze!” One of them shouted.

The detective didn't need to be told twice. Automatically he raised his hands.

"For goodness' sake! Who are you... What's going on here?" One of the soldiers asked. "Turn around!"

"Excuse me?"

"Turn around!" he shouted aggressively.

Bob obeyed. "I... I am not the one you are looking for! Are you here to catch those lunatics? Thank goodness! Help has finally come! I'm scared to death on this damn island!"

One of the men approached him and scanned his body for weapons. The soldier looked even more dangerous up close. Bob got scared. He just kept talking. It was the only way he could outsmart them.

"I had no idea what was going on, or I would have found another place to go. Did you get my radio message? Is that why you're here? You have to arrest those guys. Do you know where they are? Do you want me to show you?" That hit home.

"You know where they are?" the soldier asked.

"Of course. After all, I stayed away from those guys. They're just up ahead." Bob pointed into the undergrowth. Then he started to move, but the soldier held him back by the arm. His grip was iron.

"You stay here!" Without another word, he dragged him to one of the helicopters, pulled out a pair of handcuffs and chained Bob to the runners.

"Hey! What are you doing? I told you, I'm not the one you're looking for! Untie me right now! This is deprivation of liberty!"

Neither of them answered. The soldiers communicated with each other by a wordless nod. One of them walked in the direction that Bob had pointed. His posture was tense, his gun ready to fire, his eyes were everywhere. Then he disappeared behind a boulder.

"What kind of movie is going on here?" Bob asked, to distract the other soldier. "You're not on the police force, are you? Can you tell me what this is about?"

"Shut up!" he shouted aggressively.

"I won't let you stop me from talking just because you carry a gun! I'm not..."

"Shhh!" The soldier listened. "There was a noise."

"I bet that was the tiger," Bob said.

"Tiger?"

"Yes. There's a tiger running around here, haven't I mentioned that?"

“There are no tigers here.”

“Is it? Then that must be one of those people running around there. Why don’t you go check it out?”

The soldier thought he was crazy, but it was obvious. Nevertheless he turned around and called out into the darkness. “Dan! Dan, where are you? Dan!”

No answer. The man hesitated. Then he followed his comrade, even more tense and attentive. He too disappeared behind the boulder.

Bob waited ten seconds. Then he yelled: “Watch out for the tiger!”

A moment later, he heard a soft scream, a growl, a scuffle, a slap—then it remained silent.

“Hello?” No answer. Bob was frightened. “Hello?”

A figure emerged from behind the boulder. It was Professor Phoenix.

And behind him, Mr Schwartz and Juan, who each dragged an unconscious, handcuffed soldier over the stone floor.

“You did it!” cried Bob with relief. “Did they give you trouble?”

“Barely,” Phoenix calmly replied, searching through the soldiers’ clothes for the key to the handcuffs and freed Bob. “They made the mistake that I expected them to. Their eyes were almost everywhere. If we had hidden behind a rock, we would have been captured. But there was one direction they were not looking...”

“Up,” Juan added triumphantly. “When we threw ourselves on them from the monolith, they had no chance.”

“A brilliant performance,” praised Bob. “Let’s chain them to the helicopter runners. And then we’re gonna disable these two things. A few vines between the rotor blades, some leaves in the engine and a handful of torn out cables in the cockpit, that should be enough.”

They got to work.

“Say, what was that nonsense about a tiger?” Phoenix asked.

Bob smiled, for in his eyes, the professor was the tiger. He was about to say something when suddenly, a voice sounded—a tinny, distorted voice.

“Group One to Group Three, come in!”

“The walkie-talkie!” Bob pointed to the belt of a soldier where the heavy walkie-talkie was strapped. “Group One to Group Three, come in. Come in, Group Three.”

“What do we do now?” Bob asked.

“Nothing at all,” Phoenix replied. “There is nothing we can do. Just get out.”

“But then they know something’s gone wrong up here,” Mr Schwartz interjected. “We can only hope that Jupiter’s plan has worked by now.”

“To Groups Two, Three and Four, maximum alert! They locked us in here!”

“He’s got them,” Bob noted with satisfaction.

“Repeat... Maximum alert. Hostile subjects are not inside the facility. They are out on the island!”

After that message, to make it more difficult for Group Three, Juan destroyed the walkie-talkie.

“We have to go back,” whispered Dr Svenson.

“We can’t go back. We cannot open the secret door from the inside,” Jupiter said. “Or at least I don’t know how.”

“Then they’ll catch us!”

“Unless...”

“Yeah?”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “We’re hiding!”

“But where? There is not a slightest niche here! Behind the coffins?”

“Not behind the coffins.”

Dr Svenson stared at him from wide open eyes. Then she looked into the skeleton tunnel. The light came closer and closer. “You want us to hide in the coffins?”

Jupiter was about to answer when he heard a noise—a very unusual noise. Over the echo of the bone-crushing footsteps, another sound emanated from the tunnel—the twittering of a bird!

A bird in the middle of the night? And a bird that probably didn’t exist on this island?

It was a Red-bellied Flycatcher!

“Pete is out there,” he whispered.

“What?”

“That bird call. That’s our secret signal. He’s trying to tell us something.” Jupe whispered. “He’s probably trying to warn us—as if we haven’t already realized that we’re trapped.”

Suddenly, a blood-curdling scream sounded into the cave opening. The echo gave them goose bumps all over their bodies.

“No. He wants to get us out of here,” Jupe said.



The light in the tunnel wandered hectically back and forth. Shouting became loud.

“They’re out there!”

“We gotta get them!”

“Go back!”

Hurried steps went away from Jupiter and Dr Svenson. The light disappeared.

“Great, Pete!” whispered Jupiter. “Come, Dr Svenson. We gotta get out before those two guys come back. And they will when they find out there’s nobody out there. They won’t catch Pete.”

“Are you crazy screaming so loud?” hissed Al.

“Why? We’re trying to draw those guys out of the tunnel, right? I couldn’t think of anything else to shout. And we’re gonna keep on doing it,” Pete said. “You go right, I’ll go left. The game ends as soon as the guys are far enough away from the cave opening. Meet me back on the *Montana* in 10 minutes.”

Pete nodded at Al, then he plunged into the thick bushes of the jungle.

After the Second Investigator had realized that another group of soldiers had been posted in front of the cave opening and Jupiter and Dr Svenson were trapped in it, he had drawn up a rescue plan in no time at all. It had not been easy to find the tunnel in the dark, but Al knew the island well enough by now. Anne and Mr Olin were left behind on the *Montana*.

Pete huddled behind a tree. He was so far away from the cave opening that he could just see the light of the flashlights when the two soldiers stepped out. The beams of light were wandering around, but could not penetrate the jungle deep enough to spot Pete.

The Second Investigator waited a moment longer, then he let out another scream. Immediately, the light flashed over to him. Voices became loud, then heavy boots stamped through the undergrowth. The soldiers came closer and closer, but Pete remained motionless, crouching behind the tree. If he did not move, the men could walk two metres past him in the dark jungle without noticing him.

They were not far away when another scream sounded. It came from the opposite direction. It was Al. The soldiers were confused, discussed briefly, then changed their path and moved away from Pete. When they were out of earshot, he ventured out of hiding and made his way through

the dense undergrowth towards the sea. Halfway there, he cowered behind a rock and screamed again.

Eventually, he had to distract the guys from Al. They played this game for ten minutes, moving further and further apart. Finally, when the soldiers were halfway between them, they stopped making the screams. The soldiers wandered around for a while, spoke on their walkie-talkies, then gave up and returned to the cave opening.

The Second Investigator watched them from a distance as the cones of light moved back up the mountain. Then he made his own way back to the *Montana*.

He reached the ship almost at the same time as Al.

“Good work, Al!”

“You too!” Al remarked. “That was a great plan, wasn’t it?”

“Anyway, it worked,” Pete said. “And that’s the main thing. Now Dr Svenson and Jupiter just have to understand it and leave in time. And when everything has gone well with Bob and the others, we can leave Makatao right away. I’m getting sick of this Pacific vacation.”

They were just crossing the wooden gangplank on board the ship when Anne staggered towards them. She looked even paler, even weaker. But there was more. She was angry... and desperate.

“Anne! I told you to lie down and rest!” Al said. “Why are you...”

“Olin’s gone!” she exclaimed.

Pete and Al looked at each other.

“He ran away! Somehow, he must have got loose from his shackles. I suddenly heard footsteps in the corridor, got up and walked out of the cabin, when I just saw him running up the stairs.”

The Second Investigator did not reply.

“Are you listening to me?” cried Anne. “Olin is gone! This is a catastrophe! He will run to the *Explorer* and tell the soldiers that they are guarding the wrong ship! Or that we are trying to escape on the *Montana*. They will be here soon. And we can’t take off in the *Explorer* because it is crippled. We’re stuck here. Sooner or later, they’re gonna get us.”

Al and Pete nodded at each other and grinned. Then the Second Investigator turned to Anne. “That’s exactly what’s going to happen. Everything is going according to plan.”

## 11. The Trail of Terror

Five minutes later, Jupiter and Dr Svenson arrived.

“Thank you, Pete! That was a last-second rescue.”

“I must thank you, too,” Dr Svenson agreed. “If you hadn’t distracted the soldiers, we would have to hide in the stone coffins.”

“Did everything work out there?” Pete asked.

“They are locked behind the armoured door,” reported Jupiter.

“But that won’t last long. I’m sure they know the cave opening. And then they’ll get out through the skeleton tunnel, just like we did. So we don’t have much time. How did it go here?”

“Perfect. Climbing over the rocks, I had to take the shackles off Olin. When I tied him to a chair below deck afterwards, I made the knot extra loose, just like you said. And while Al and I were off on our rescue mission, Olin escaped.”

“Tell me what’s going on!” Anne shouted furiously. “What’s all this about? Why did you want Olin to escape?”

“So that he can run to the *Explorer* and tell the soldiers that we will flee on the *Montana*,” Jupiter explained calmly.

“And what’s the point of that? They’ll catch us!” Anne exclaimed.

“They won’t. Because we would be on board the *Explorer*. We’ll go there by the motorboat, of course, so as not to run into the soldiers, who are probably already on their way here.”

“But I thought that the *Explorer*’s crippled,” Anne said.

“Wrong. I never trusted Olin from the beginning,” Jupiter explained. “I knew he would make trouble as soon as he got the opportunity. So my plan was to supply him with false information and then give him the opportunity to escape. Now he’s luring the soldiers away from the *Explorer* and that’s exactly what we want.”

“Then what did you do in the engine room, Al? You must have been there for 10 minutes!”

“All faked,” Al replied with a grin. “I wanted it to look as real as possible. After all, Olin was watching us.”

“What about Professor Phoenix and the others?” Anne asked.

“They know and will join us at the *Explorer* once they’ve disabled the helicopters.”

Anne pulled a face. “And I was the only one who didn’t know about the plan.”

“There was no opportunity to share it with you,” Pete apologized. “Jupiter whispered it to me as we set off. And I could take Al aside for a few seconds on the way to the beach. But you were always around Olin, and our plan was not to let him know.”

“We should leave now,” urged Jupiter. “Otherwise we’ll thwart our own plan by standing around here chatting for ages.”

They left the *Montana* and climbed into the motorboat one after the other. They removed the wooden gangplanks between the rocks and the ship, and used them as paddles to get out of the bay. The engine would have been too loud. They paddled around the island in a wide arc so that they could not be seen from land.

Then the *Explorer* appeared in front of them. Now it would show if their plan really worked and the ship was unguarded.

At least it was dark. But despite the starry night, the beach was hardly visible. It was impossible to tell if there was anyone near the ship. Then suddenly a light came on. A flashlight! Someone was standing on board the *Explorer* and was signalling them—on, off, on, off.

“That’s Bob!” cried Jupiter.

“Are you sure?” Pete asked doubtfully. “It could also be the soldiers who are trying to trick us.”

The First Investigator shook his head vigorously. “Watch the rhythm of the light.”

Everybody stared at it. “Two short, two long, two short,” Al counted.

“It’s Morse code!” Pete was digging around in his memory. Morse. He had learned it once. But unfortunately long forgotten. “And what does it mean?”

“Short, short, long, long, short, short is the code for the question mark,” explained Jupiter. “Now do you believe me that it’s Bob?”

When they reached the *Explorer*, Bob looked down at them. “All here?”

“Yes!”

“Wait, I’ll drop you a rope ladder!”

A little later, they climbed aboard the ship. Professor Phoenix solemnly shook Jupiter’s hand. “Congratulations, Jupiter. Your plan

worked from the first point to the last.”

“Not quite yet,” the First Investigator confessed. “It was not planned that the soldiers would post two guards at the cave opening.”

Bob waved him down. “Little things. The rest was fine, anyway. The helicopters were crippled, and the pilots were tied up. When we reached the beach, we could still see how Olin ran excitedly to the soldiers and talked to them. Then they made radio contact with their colleagues and disappeared.”

“And that’s what we should do now,” Juan interrupted the conversation. “Before they return. I’ll start the engines!”

Jupiter and Bob had decided to take the motorboat and got back down.

Two minutes later, the ship’s powerful engine roared. The anchor was pulled and the position lights were switched on. Then Juan stepped on the accelerator. The *Explorer* began to move and picked up speed. The motorboat, with Bob steering, chugged along beside the *Explorer* like a cleaner fish following a huge shark.

Everyone except Mr Schwartz, who had taken the helm, stood at the stern and looked back at the island. Makatao was a black colossus on that moonlit night. But Pete’s eyes were less on the island than what was going on there. At any moment, he expected to see the helicopters rising like angry hornets. How long would it take the soldiers to repair them? They had definitely seen or heard the escape of the *Explorer*. They were probably furious.

“I’m sure they’re standing in front of the helicopters and slowly realizing that they have been taken in,” Juan rejoiced. “Probably someone’s coming up with the idea of contacting Kwajalein by radio. But we destroyed the radios on board as well. And the walkie-talkies have only a short range. Well, Olin, I guess you’ll be going home now. I never trusted that guy.”

“Of course,” Dr Svenson said dismissively, but with a smile.

“I will only feel safe when I am on the plane to Los Angeles,” muttered Pete. Anne and Albert nodded in agreement.

“A few more hours and we’ll be on our way home,” said Dr Svenson. “Goodbye, Makatao. Perhaps one day I shall return to unlock the rest of your secrets... if there are any left.”

The island was getting smaller—a dark patch on the horizon that slowly faded.

A dark spot where a light suddenly came on.

Two lights. Pete squinting his eyes together. "What is that?"

"Something on the shore," Al said. "Flashlights, maybe?"

"Too bright for flashlights." A cold shiver gripped Pete. "I don't feel good."

"Hey! You up there!" That was Bob.

Pete bent over the railing. The motorboat was right behind them. Bob stood at the wheel while Jupiter looked back with his binoculars.

"Did you see the lights?" cried Pete. "Can you see what that is, Jupe?"

"Yes! It's... oh, my goodness!" Jupe shouted.

"What?"

"It's the *Montana*!"

"The *Montana*?" cried Al. I sabotaged the engine! They cannot follow us!"

"But they are," replied Jupiter in horror. "Apparently your work wasn't thorough enough this time, Al! They're coming straight for us!"

Pete turned to Professor Phoenix and asked: "How fast is the *Montana*? Can we outrun it?"

The professor's rent froze. "No, the *Montana* is faster than the *Explorer*. It's not much, but we don't have much of a lead. At maximum speed, they'll catch up with us in half an hour."

Juan turned around. "Schwartz! Full power!"

"This will not save us, Juan," Phoenix said. "It's eight hours to Pohnpei. The *Montana* will have long caught up with us."

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Dr Svenson. "The *Montana* has heavily armed soldiers on board. Very angry soldiers. We haven't got a chance."

On board the *Montana*, small lights flashed up. Two seconds later, they heard the sound of gunfire.

"They're shooting at us!" shouted Anne.

"Don't worry," Al tried to calm her down. "Those are just warning shots. They're just trying to scare us. From this distance, they can't hit anything."

"Not yet," said Pete gloomily, his eyes fixed on the two bright position lights. "But they are coming closer! What shall we do?"

"Come down!" cried Jupiter.

"What did you say?" Pete asked.

"Come down to the motorboat! It's a bit cramped for nine people, but we'll lose the *Montana* easily."

Phoenix nodded. "Yes, that is the only way. We have to give up the *Explorer*. Hurry. There's no time to lose."

"If we stop, the *Montana* will be with us in five minutes," Albert said. "It would be close."

"Then we won't stop." Professor Phoenix bent down to Bob and Jupiter. "Can you steer the boat well enough to make the manoeuvre at full speed?"

"I think so!" cried Bob.

They gathered at the railing. Mr Schwartz had set the *Explorer* on a straight course. Straight as a die, but at full speed, the ship ploughed through the waves. Pete threw down the rope ladder, where it was caught and held on by Jupiter. The Second Investigator climbed down first. The water rushed away under his feet and although Bob did his best as helmsman, the motorboat rocked back and forth in a precarious manner. But Pete jumped on deck unharmed.

Next was Anne. Fearfully, she clung to every single rung.

"Come on, Anne, you can do it," Bob shouted encouragingly to her.

"It looks worse up there than it is!" Pete added.

A short while later, she was safe on board, too.

"Fellas," whispered Jupiter, while the others set off on their descent. "I don't want to worry you, but we have a problem."

"I'd say we have a whole lot of problems," Pete said. "Thirteen of them, to be exact. Twelve hardcore soldiers who want us dead rather than alive, and one very bad-tempered Mr Olin. Did I miss something?"

"Yes," Jupiter said seriously. "By boat we can make it to Pohnpei in half the time, but our flight doesn't leave until tomorrow morning. By then the *Montana* will have reached the island as well."

"Oh, no!" Pete exclaimed.

"Oh, yes," Jupe continued.

"Then they'll get us on Pohnpei. And now what?" Pete asked.

"We'll have to think of something," Jupe said.

Slowly and carefully, the whole crew climbed on deck of the boat. The last one was Professor Phoenix.

"All aboard?" Jupe shouted. "It's time to leave our dear friends behind!"

Before Jupe could let go of the rope ladder, Anne suddenly pushed him away, grabbed the rope ladder and clung to it. At the same moment,

Bob, who did not realize what had happened, accelerated and steered the motorboat away from the hull of the ship.

“Anne!” Al shouted. “My goodness! What are you doing?”

She didn’t answer, but started climbing back up to the ship!

“Bob!” cried Jupiter. “Back! Turn us back! We have to get Anne back on board!”

“What?” Bob cried. The motorboat were already a distance from the *Explorer*. Now Bob had to adjust the speed again and steer back very carefully so as not to collide with the steel hull.

“Anne!” cried Dr Svenson. “Come back!” She had reached the top by now and was climbing over the railing.

Bob managed to position the boat just at the height of the rope ladder again when the ladder was suddenly pulled up.

“Anne!!! She’s gone completely insane!” Al shouted.

“Bob! Steer us away from the ship! We must see what she’s up to!” Jupe instructed.

“Aye, aye, Captain Jones.” Bob put some distance between boat and ship. They could see Anne entering the bridge. Jupiter looked through the binoculars. “She is at the wheel. She’s turning the ship around!”

The *Explorer* lay down to the side and made a right turn. Still at full speed, the ship described a huge arc. Bob kept a safe distance from the steel monster, but stayed close to it.

“Oh, my goodness!” cried Pete. “She’s steering the *Explorer* straight at the *Montana*. At full power!”

“Then... then... she’s on a collision course? If the *Explorer*... rams the *Montana*, then...” Al stuttered.

“Maybe she wants to make the soldiers turn away,” Jupiter thought.

But the *Montana* didn’t even think about it. With undiminished speed the two ships headed towards each other. The *Montana* approached rapidly. She was only one kilometre away at most.

“Turn away, girl!” cried Juan. “Turn away!”

Six hundred metres. There were gun shots from the *Montana*—warning shots—but this time for a different reason. Then the *Montana* suddenly changed course to take evasive action. But the *Explorer* also turned—and headed for the soldiers again!

“She really wants to ram them!” cried Jupiter. “Hang on, Bob, hang on!”



Three hundred metres. The *Montana* tried to escape. But the turning manoeuvre cost them speed. If the *Explorer* did not change course, they would collide.

A hundred metres.

“There!” cried Jupiter. “She’s jumping overboard!” A small black figure fell from the railing into the Pacific Ocean. “Head towards her, we have to pull her out of the water!”

Fifty metres. The two ships were on collision course. The *Montana* kept on turning, but it was too slow.

Ten metres.

*Booom!*

With a terrible roar, the razor-sharp bow of the *Explorer* rammed the *Montana*, tore open the thick steel body and crushed the hull like a rotten apple. The *Montana* lay to the side, threatening to topple over, but the *Explorer* continued to crunch and hold on to the steel body. The ships groaned and shrieked as if they were two giant sea monsters, locked in a deadly duel!

Something exploded. A small pillar of fire rose up. The ships gave up moaning. The nightmare of two ships wedged in each other continued... and sank slowly.

By now Bob was close enough to see the soldiers throwing life rafts into the sea, which inflated themselves and jumped after them.

“Anne! There she is!” cried Dr Svenson. “Careful, Bob, slow down!”

Bob came to a halt beside the girl, who was desperately treading water and sweeping her arms wildly. Albert and Mr Phoenix grabbed her and helped her aboard.

“What about the soldiers?” Bob asked. “We can’t let them...”

“I’m counting them right now,” replied Jupiter, who searched the troubled sea with binoculars. “Three life rafts. Ten men are already on them. Olin is being pulled up right now. And number twelve and thirteen are swimming towards the rafts. It’s all right, they all got away.”

“Look!” Juan pointed to the two ships.

The water rushed into the torn hull of the *Montana* and pulled the ship deeper and deeper. But the *Explorer* also had a huge crack in its bow and was sinking. The *Montana* lay on its side and pulled the wedged *Explorer* with it. Both ships overturned. The waves greedily licked at the steel bodies, pulled at them, washed over them—until they sank bubbling and seething in the waves.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jupiter said soundlessly, shocked by everything he had just seen. “Before the soldiers get any ideas over there.”

Bob stepped on the accelerator and headed for Pohnpei.

A few moments later, the sea had swallowed the ships completely. What remained were foaming waves that laid a white shroud over the ocean.

“Anne!” cried Dr Svenson and bent over her. She sat on the floor, wet and trembling, staring into space. “What... what have you done?”

“Miss Fox,” said Professor Phoenix, calmly and eagerly. “You... You...”

“Not Fox,” said Anne in a barely audible, trembling voice. “My name is not Anne Fox.”

“What?” Phoenix exclaimed, confused.

“My name is... Anne Hadden.”

## 12. High Strung

When the plane took off, the rising sun bathed the island in golden light. Jupiter looked out the window until Pohnpei had disappeared behind. Then he dropped back into the uncomfortable seat and closed his eyes.

He was happy that the motorboat had reached Pohnpei unharmed and his worst fears of a military reception committee in Kolonia had fortunately not materialized. Everyone had secured a place on the flight to Los Angeles, and they were on their way home... at last!

He was finished. Exhausted to death, just like everyone else. The events of the past twelve hours had taken a toll on every one of them physically and mentally. They were so tired that most were already asleep before the plane took off.

But Jupiter couldn't sleep, and it was not only because of the air pockets. Too much was still going on in his head—the missiles, the sunken ships, the soldiers who barely escaped with their lives...

He turned around and looked at all the members of his group. He sensed that everyone was high strung and restless because the drama was still not over yet. What would happen when they land at the airport? Would there be a contingent of security personnel ready to arrest them? What would happen to the members of Sphinx and Anne?

But there were still some unanswered questions. Anne down with a fever after her rescue from the icy water. She was seriously ill. Dr Svenson, who was sitting next to Jupiter, constantly dabbed Anne's glowing forehead with a damp cloth.

"I think she's waking up," the archaeologist whispered suddenly.

Jupiter turned over.

Anne opened her eyes. She still looked sick, but apparently she knew where she was. She gave a little smile.

"Hello Anne!" said Dr Svenson softly. "How are you?"

"Lousy."

"We're almost there," Dr Svenson said. "A few more hours and we'll get you to a hospital right away."

She nodded silently.

Jupiter could not hold on to himself. He just had to ask her. “So Anne Hadden... Were you serious?”

“I am always serious in life-threatening situations,” she replied quietly.

“Are you... Joseph Hadden’s daughter?” Jupiter continued.

“Please, Jupiter,” admonished Dr Svenson. “You can see how weak she is. Can’t this wait until later?”

“It’s okay,” Anne waved. “I’ll give you the short version. I see Jupiter is bursting with curiosity... No, I’m not his daughter. I’m his sister. The sister of Joseph and Rachel Hadden.”

“And... your brother sent you on this expedition?”

She laughed softly. The laughter turned into a cough. She pulled her face in pain. “No. He knows nothing of this. I sneaked into Sphinx. I knew my brother and sister were planning a really dirty deal. After all, it wasn’t the first time. They have so much money and so much power. And they only use both to gain more money and power. This had to end. So I went to Makatao to expose their schemes. Is that enough for now?”

Jupiter nodded. “Well, almost... Why did you send the *Explorer* on a collision course? You could have been killed! There might have been another way to escape from the soldiers.”

“To show Joseph. I suspected my brother would get away again like he had dozens of times before. We may have thwarted his plan, but we probably can’t prove that he committed a crime. So I wanted to make him pay for what he did.”

She looked at Jupiter grimly. Sheer anger glowed in her eyes. The First Investigator guessed that behind this story was a family drama of such dimensions that he didn’t even want to know the details. At least not now. Maybe someday Anne would tell them more... When she was well again... When this was all over...

“Now he has two ships less,” Jupiter remarked.

“Exactly,” Anne said. “And that will cost him millions. It might even ruin his business. He deserves it. Besides, he’s gonna have to answer for it now. Two shipwrecks at the bottom of the ocean are evidence that is difficult to dispose of.” She closed her eyes.

Jupiter left it at that. Perhaps more later. He turned to Dr Svenson. “Mr Hadden will not be the only one to answer,” he said so softly that none of the other passengers could hear him.

“That depends,” Dr Svenson replied mysteriously. “Once we land, we may be surrounded by the police and the press. We have to get the story of the banned nuclear tests and the fraud of the US government out into the open. I hope you still feel the same way, right?”

“Of course,” Jupiter said. “In the process, everything else will come to light, including the activities of Sphinx. The case would be dealt with by the court, and it might even result in prison sentences.”

Dr Svenson looked at him seriously. “That depends on whether or not you three betray us.”

“What do you mean?” Jupiter asked, surprised.

“When the plane lands, I’m sure we’ll receive a very big welcome. But look around you. Besides the nine of us, there are thirty other passengers on board. Most of them will be glad to get away from the hustle and bustle. No one will control them. Also, when we land, no one will know what story you have to tell. Do you think it would be noticeable if six drained-out figures who look as if they’d been living on a remote island for weeks, were to mingle with the other thirty and just disappear?”

Jupiter looked at her for a long time. He had a new-found respect for her—for her anti-nuclear stance. But she was a criminal. She had stolen and sold valuable art treasures countless times all over the world, as had the other Sphinx members—Professor Phoenix, Mr Schwartz, Juan and Albert. Had he not shared and survived with them the most dangerous adventure of his life, the answer would have been easy for him. But now, he was at a loss.

He pinched his lower lip. There had to be a solution—or at least, a compromise solution. After a good half an hour, without a word to anyone, he got up from his uncomfortable seat and walked down the aisle to the front of the plane where there was a satellite phone. In Los Angeles, it was now evening.

“Yeah?”

“Hello, Jelena.”

“Jupiter! Goodness, Jupiter! Where are you? Are you all right? What happened?”

“We’re on a plane home. We are tired, but healthy. And so much has happened that if I were to tell you now, this phone call would cost me a fortune. Just be patient for a few more hours.”

Jelena literally screamed with excitement. “Gosh, I’m so relieved! I... I.... Are you really all right? And you’re coming back? When?”

Jupiter gave her the flight number and arrival time. “You are welcome to pick us up. But until then, we need you to do something for us.”

“Whatever you want! Shoot!”

“Notify Inspector Cotta.”

“The police? But... but... you know...” Barely audible she murmured: “The CIA!”

“I know. But that’s why I want you to call not only the inspector, but the press.”

“You mean Bob’s father?”

Jupiter smiled. “No, better not him. But other journalists.”

“What do you mean?”

“Call every newspaper, every radio station, every TV station you know. Tell them that if they get to Los Angeles airport by the time we land, they’ll get exclusive coverage of the biggest political scandal in years. Convince them it’s really important, okay? I want the terminal crawling with the press people! You’re a natural on the phone, Jelena, you’ll do fine. Oh, and one more thing, if there’s a large military presence loitering around, don’t be surprised. The uniformed boys will disappear as soon as they see the cameras.”

Bob was the first to leave the arrival hall. He hadn’t quite stepped out the door when Jelena rushed towards him.

With no consideration for the other passengers, she dashed through the crowd in her wheelchair and made a rapid emergency stop less than half a metre before the detective. She beamed and stretched out her arms. “If I could, I’d fall around your neck!”

Bob took her in his arms—and got such a big kiss that he blushed with embarrassment.

Jupiter, who was behind him, looked discreetly to the side—and could not believe his eyes. Camera crews, reporters, and press people were everywhere. Jelena had done a great job, as expected.

He continued to look around. Maybe the soldiers on Makatao had somehow managed to communicate with their commanders. And maybe they had made sure that the escapees in Los Angeles would be received accordingly. But if so, someone had pulled the emergency brake in time. There were no uniformed personnel around. Three youths arrested by the military police—that would have caused more of a stir in front of the assembled press than those responsible would have liked.

However, one man in uniform did appear. And he didn't look very pleased. Inspector Cotta rushed to them.

"Jupiter Jones! What's going on? What does all this mean? What are all these reporters doing here? I know you're responsible for this. What have you got yourselves into again? This time you've really gone too far!"

"Good afternoon, Inspector," Pete said kindly. "I agree with you absolutely. We've gone too far."

"But as so often, we couldn't help it," Bob added. "It just happened."

Cotta was not amused. He frowned at them. "I want some answers! And I want them now!"

"You'll get them," Jupiter promised. "Right now. In front of our audience, who doesn't even know why they're here, and before they get bored and leave."

He climbed up on a bench to get an overview and shouted: "Thank you all for coming." The first flashes of lights came on. "Come closer! This is where you'll get your story."

"Jupiter Jones!" cried Cotta. "I warn you! This is no longer a joke!"

"No, Inspector. I'm afraid it isn't."

The journalists approached him curiously. Within moments, a dense cluster had formed around them. Microphones were raised and cameras aligned.

Before he said anything further, Jupiter looked over the crowd. Six completely inconspicuous looking people slowly moved out of the crowd towards the airport exit. Nobody but Jupiter paid attention to them.

Just before they were out of sight, the six turned around. Dr Svenson, who had put a supporting arm around Anne, raised her hand briefly, nodded and smiled to Jupiter. Then they left.

Two weeks later, The Three Investigators and Jelena were sitting in front of Headquarters at the salvage yard in the blazing afternoon sun, enjoying the peace and quiet around them.

Silence... They had not had it since their return. And even now, it was only a small interlude.

At first, it was the journalists who had checked their story within a day and then clamoured for details. They wanted to know everything—over and over and over again—until finally Inspector Cotta freed them from the ordeal.

The police interrogations had not been pleasant as well. They were less interested in wordy embellishments to their story than in the facts—especially the escape of the five members of Sphinx and the only other witness of the incident which caused The Three Investigators a lot of trouble. But what could they do when Dr Svenson, Juan, Mr Schwartz, Albert and Professor Phoenix had secretly disappeared? After all, The Three Investigators couldn't be held responsible.

In the next few days, they were interrogated again. This time before a committee of inquiry that had been set up to investigate the outrageous accusations they had made against the US government.

"They won't be able to cover up anything," Jupiter was convinced. "In the meantime, dozens of journalists have already been to Makatao and turned the island upside down. Have you seen today's *Los Angeles Times*?"

"Of course," Bob replied. "A giant photograph of the stone coffins with the explosive contents."

"I just hope the journalists are careful and all go to the doctor immediately after their visit to Makatao," said Jupiter.

"To the doctor?" Jelena asked. "What for?"

"Haven't you heard?" Jupiter wondered. "They finally figured out what the curse of the Island of Death was all about. The deaths of that time and Anne's mysterious illness have been solved."

"No, this is news to me," Jelena said. "Tell me."

"*Aspergillus flavus*."

"Excuse me?" Jelena remarked.

"His new favourite word," Pete mocked. "He says it a hundred times a day. *Aspergillus flavus*... *Aspergillus flavus*... *Aspergillus flavus*..."

Jupiter ignored him and continued: "It's a fungus. It was responsible for many people dying."

"A fungus? How's that?" Jelena wondered.

"It had developed in the coffins. The slowly decomposing bodies and the substances used to preserve them provided the ideal breeding ground for this fungus. When the burial cave was found and the coffins were opened, the fungus was released. The common thing about this fungus is that it weakens the immune system of people who come into contact with it. It attacks the organs susceptible to disease in an extremely aggressive way. This can lead to death within a few days or weeks without medical treatment. This was why there were so many deaths among the people that



were there at that time. Some had liver damage, others kidney failure and so on.

“The fungus has spread throughout the lower level of the facility, and there was where Anne was trapped. She was probably particularly susceptible to the infection. But I understand that she has been released from the hospital.”

“Oh, my goodness!” cried Jelena. “And what about you? You were down there too! You followed that deadly trail!”

“Since the cause was known, we’ve all been checked out,” Bob reassured her. “We’ve received the necessary treatment.”

“By the way, the same fate as the people on Makatao befell the discoverers of the Pharaoh’s tomb of Tutankhamen in Egypt in 1922,” said Jupiter. “There was talk of a curse back then as well, but decades later it turned out to be *Aspergillus flavus*.”

“The little rascal,” grinned Pete.

“This is really crazy,” Jelena said—not for the first time in the past few days. “You have uncovered a huge thing. First the nuclear tests, now the deaths... You are heroes!”

“Heroes?” Pete laughed bitterly. “I didn’t notice that. Everyone hates us, especially Cotta. He will never forgive us for not delivering Phoenix and company to him.”

“Oh, come on, he’s way past that,” Bob said. “Sphinx is just a small fish now. In reality, Cotta is proud of us. But he’ll never admit it, of course.”

“I’m sticking with it. He’s cheesed off. And he’s not alone,” Pete said. “The worst is with my parents. For two weeks, I’ve had to listen to sermons every day. They would ground me immediately if they could. But I have to go to the police or some place else every other day to give statements. The fact that my mother let me come here today is a real miracle. Meanwhile, she gets into a frenzy whenever she hears the name ‘Jupiter Jones’.”

“Oh, come on!” Jupiter rebelled. “As if I were to be blamed for everything! I don’t feel any different! Aunt Mathilda is not very fond of you two either.”

“It’s the same for me,” Bob said. “My parents would like to forbid me to have any contact with you two.”

“Okay, okay,” Jelena remarked. “But it is clear to everyone who is the guilty party here.”

Pete nodded grimly. "Skinny Norris."

"That rascal has gone away for a while," said Jupiter. "His parents say that he's on vacation, so it seems. But he has to come back sometime."

"Yes, no matter how much we despise him, looking back to that night at the pier, we gotta hand it to that dingbat that he had a plan to get himself out of this mess, and he executed it with clockwork precision," Bob remarked.

"Nevertheless, we eventually prevailed... in what is possibly our most incredible and dangerous adventure ever!" Pete added.

"Skinny Norris..." Jupiter said. "Yes, we have some unfinished business to settle with him. I can't wait!"